

Little Sister
(is watching
you, too)

Curated by
Christiane Paul

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Pratt
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Selected Works

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*Technology has taken us by surprise,
and the regions that it has opened up are
still glaringly empty.*
—Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*

Little Sister (is watching you, too) features artworks and activist projects that look back at the apparatus of government agencies and systems of control, addressing issues surrounding ethics, accountability, and the visual and sonic vocabulary used to see or hear the individual or systems of power. Rather than focusing on surveillance or “sousveillance” per se, the show asks questions about the limits of transparency and visualization and explores how data analysis is shaping decisions, civic rights, and liberties. How are we being watched and how are we watching government agencies and systems of control? What are the differences in how citizens see the state apparatus and how systems of power see the citizen? Where are the boundaries between the protector and traitor, and where do we need to protect ourselves from our protectors—the governments that are trying to ensure our safety? Many of the projects in the exhibition engage in what is referred to as open-source intelligence (OSINT), gathering intelligence from publicly available sources.

Both Paolo Cirio’s paintings and Trevor Paglen’s aerial photographs are seemingly simple gestures of looking back at the surveillance apparatus and some of the people playing leading roles in its operations, but they raise a set of complex issues. Paglen’s photographs, shot by night from a helicopter rented by the artist in 2013, show three of the largest agencies in the U.S. intelligence community: the NSA’s headquarters; the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO), which builds and operates America’s spy satellites; and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), which matches geographic information to surveillance data by mapping imagery. Paglen’s aerial photographs, which he makes available on Wikimedia to be downloaded by anyone, with or without attribution, highlight the stark contrast between the invisibility of the different agencies and the quite visible physicality of their vast infrastructure with its buildings, data centers, and personnel. Paglen’s project implicitly questions the necessity for keeping a large sector of governmental operations out of the public’s sight and obscuring accountability (since increased transparency of the surveillance apparatus

would not automatically jeopardize its operations). Cirio’s *Overexposed* series takes a more “personal” approach by presenting photos of high-ranking U.S. intelligence officials, which he displays as paintings or posters attached to walls in public spaces throughout major cities worldwide. The photos were taken mostly in informal and private contexts and gathered by the artist on the Internet, largely on social media platforms. The unauthorized exhibition and distribution of these images makes us look back at the officials who authorize surveillance and at the appropriation and recontextualization of personal images by government agencies as opposed to an individual.

Other projects in the exhibition map and investigate how our data is being collected, and how this process may affect how we are “constructed” as citizens. *IXmaps*, a visualization project originally started by Nancy Paterson under the title *CHmaps* and continued by a team of professors and researchers at the University of Toronto (Andrew Clement, Colin McCann, Antonio Gamba, Jonathan Obar, David Mason, Dawn Walker), is an interactive mapping tool that enables users to take a look at the routes that data packets take across the Internet and highlights data hubs with surveillance capabilities and other features along the way. *IXmaps* traces how the data of Canadian Internet users communicating with a Canadian server might pass through exchange points in the United States where the NSA might have installed so-called “splitter rooms,” making the communication subject to Patriot Act incursions by U.S. authorities.

A different perspective on Internet communications is provided by James Bridle’s *Citizen Ex*, a downloadable browser extension that anyone can install on their computer to calculate and visualize what Bridle refers to as our “Algorithmic Citizenship,” a new form of citizenship that has emerged as we traverse time, space, and law zones. Countries and companies, through people or machines, now make decisions about us and determine our rights on the basis of visits to websites, which are treated as evidence of association with a particular place. The NSA uses browsing data to assign a percentage score to people browsing the Internet and decide whether they are protected as U.S. citizens who can’t be spied on by the NSA. If the percentage score calculated on the basis of browsing history drops below 50% American, for example, they can start recording people’s history. Bridle’s

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project traces how part of our citizenship has become a collection of data that is constantly recalibrated and gives us different rights in different places.

Both Bridle's *A Quiet Disposition* and the installation project *Endless War* by YoHa and Matthew Fuller investigate the ramifications of evaluating information and making decisions on the basis of database analysis. *A Quiet Disposition* is a system that looks back at what the U.S. government calls the disposition matrix, the government's intelligence-gathering and targeting processes. The matrix, which is supervised by the National Counterterrorism Center, is commonly described as a database used for generating capture lists and kill lists for drones. However, details on how the database is compiled and how it analyzes its entries are not public. Bridle's online system is a "weak" artificial intelligence searching for articles and sources about drones and related technologies, much like the disposition matrix itself. It analyzes relevant texts and draws conclusions based on the relationships between names, objects, and terminologies, and connects pairs of names that appear to be linked through the information Bridle's system has gathered. The decision engine is displayed on a screen as it queries the database and creates new pairings based on the connections it identifies. The ten *Disposition Matrix* books, shown as part of the installation, are an archive of the database's attempt to understand the pairings. Bridle investigates the disposition matrix as an organizing principle—as a way in which intent is reoriented and in which relationships between objects that produce action are organized.

Endless War by YoHa and Matthew Fuller critically investigates the database operations of the Afghan War Diary, a conglomeration of over 91,000 reports released by WikiLeaks on July 25, 2010, and covering the war in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2010. The primary source of the Afghan War Diary is a database created by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD)—the Combined Information Data Network Exchange (CIDNE)—compiled by humans, and spatially and temporally processed by satellites and clocks. *Endless War* is a software system that uncovers structures of the analytic viewpoints, both machine and human, in the Afghan War Diary data set. The project uses so-called N-gram fingerprints as a method for sorting the text. N-grams are adjacent sequences of such items as phonemes,

syllables, letters, words, or base pairs in a given text that allow for calculating the standard frequency of these items in a language or text body. The installation of *Endless War* consists of a computer analyzing the data in real time; a 3-channel projection of the analysis' results; and microphones picking up the sounds of the central processing—thereby sonifying the inner workings of the machine. The project's intent is to unveil the data and give an idea of the way in which a computer system reads and makes sense of the entries in order to assist humans in learning from an "intelligence" that is not their own.

Luke DuBois' project *The Customer Is Always Right* provides yet another perspective on data analysis by creating a portrait of the social graph of Hacking Team, an Italian cybersecurity agency that sells high end surveillance products to governments and corporations on six continents, many of whom have questionable records on civil rights and ethics, respectively.

The constantly evolving forms and vehicles of surveillance are explored in Lawrence Abu Hamdan's *A Convention of Tiny Movements*, a speculative fiction about the potential future of surveillance. Computer scientists at MIT have discovered that the tiny vibrations caused when our voices are propelled through the air and hit objects surrounding us can be extracted through a high-speed video recording of the respective object. The sound producing those vibrations can thereby be reconstructed. Thus, a packet of chips in a supermarket can become a listening device or "visual microphone." *A Convention of Tiny Movements* consists of an audio documentary as well as a photograph that shows the shelves of a supermarket in Achrafieh, Beirut (ca. August 2017); it also presents an index of the objects that the NSA, GCHQ, and other agencies might use as sound recording devices in the future. The objects that can already be successfully used are represented in color; the ones that are currently still "silent spots" of the new technology are shown in black and white. *A Convention of Tiny Movements* captures the empty spaces of technology in a literal and metaphorical way, highlighting spaces where technology can't yet reach, as well as spaces that have been opened by technology but still need to be filled with meaning and understanding of its consequences, whether ethical, legal, or political.

Social conventions expect that Big Brother will look out for—and protect—his little

sister who doesn't necessarily have the same level of agency and authority to claim her rights. However, in reality, Big Brother frequently crosses the line and enters into a territory where protection infringes upon personal rights and becomes an excuse to exert power—a power that ultimately undermines, rather than sustains, liberty. Little sister has no recourse but to look out for herself. She must gain access to the materials that allow her to acquire the literacy needed to renegotiate and reclaim the space and the rights that she may have lost to her Big Brother; and she must navigate this new and vastly uncharted territory between knowledge and power.

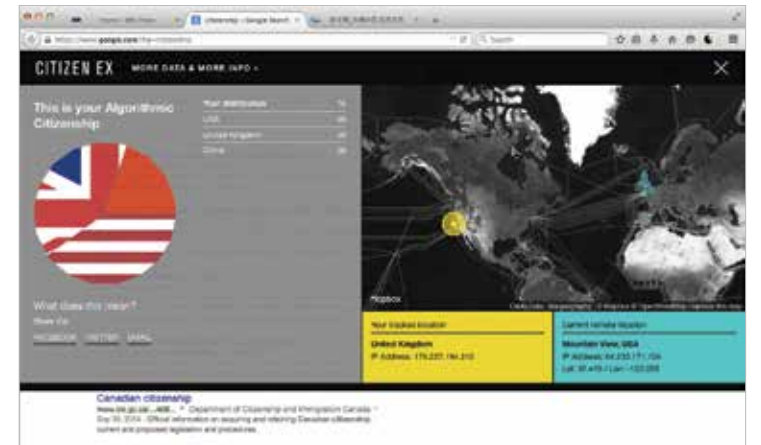
Christiane Paul is an associate professor at the School of Media Studies at The New School, and adjunct curator of new media arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her recent books are *A Companion to Digital Art* (Blackwell-Wiley, forthcoming) and *Digital Art* (Thames and Hudson, 3rd revised edition, 2015). At the Whitney Museum, she curated exhibitions including *Cory Arcangel: Pro Tools* (2011) and *Profiling* (2007), and is responsible for artport, the museum's portal to Internet art. Other curatorial work includes *What Lies Beneath* (Borusan Contemporary, Istanbul, 2015), *The Public Private* (Kellen Gallery, The New School, 2013), and *Feedforward. The Angel of History* (co-curated with Steve Dietz; LABoral, Gijon, Spain, 2009).

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Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *A Convention of Tiny Movements*, 2015. Components: *Shudder the Thought*, 9 minutes, audio, vibration speaker, tissue box; *Spinneys Supermarket*, Achrafieh Beirut, August 2017, photograph.



James Bridle, *Citizen Ex*, 2015, browser extension.



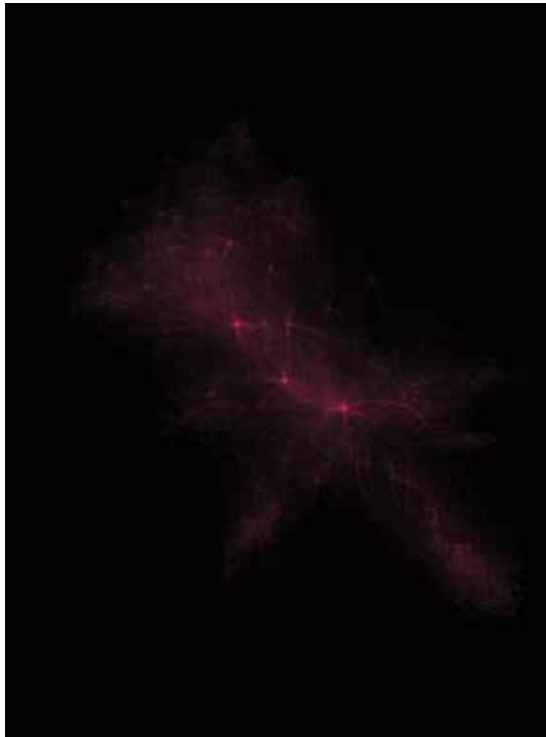
James Bridle, *A Quiet Disposition*, 2012–ongoing, set of 10 *Disposition Matrix* books, database, and website





Paolo Cirio, "Keith Alexander," *Overexposed series*, 2015, acrylic paint on photographic paper.

Nancy Paterson, *CHmaps* (precursor to *IXmaps*), 2007, website, Flash.



R. Luke DuBois, *The Customer is Always Right*, 2015, print.

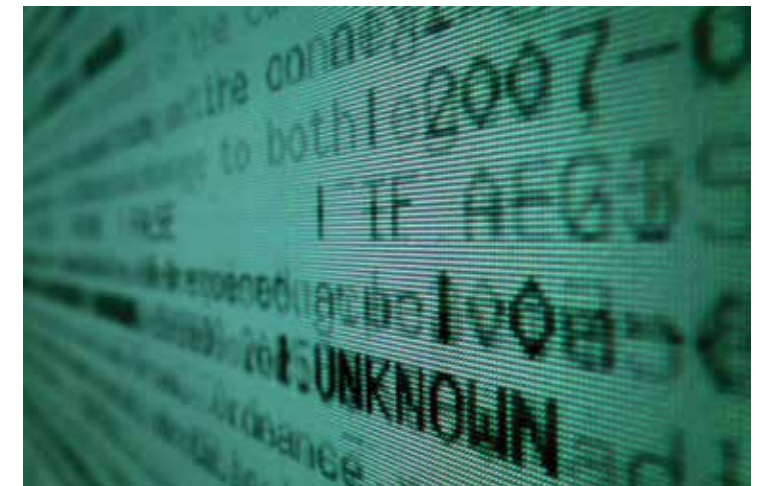
Andrew Clement, Colin McCann, Antonio Gamba, Jonathan Obar, David Mason, and Dawn Walker, *IXmaps*, 2008, website.



YoHa (Matsuko Yokokoji and Graham Harwood), with Matthew Fuller, *Endless War*, 2013, 3-channel video-computer installation, N-gram analyses of the WikiLeaks Afghan War Diaries.



Trevor Paglen, aerial photograph of the National Security Agency (open source digital image), commissioned by *Creative Time Reports*, 2013.



Lawrence Abu Hamdan
James Bridle
Paolo Cirio
R. Luke DuBois
Trevor Paglen
Nancy Paterson and
IXmaps project team
(Andrew Clement,
Colin McCann,
Antonio Gamba,
Jonathan Obar,
David Mason,
and Dawn Walker)
YoHa (Matsuko Yokokoji
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