

The Art of Seeing Without Being Seen

SUSAN CAHILL

Sandra S. Phillips, ed. *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance, and the Camera Since 1870*. San Francisco and New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Yale University Press, 2010. 256 pp.

The widespread viewing of previously unseen activities and spaces has become commonplace in a moment characterized by cell phone cameras, youtube videos, reality television and programmes such as Google Earth. The need to uncover and see has gained increased social importance through the elevated use of CCTVs, UAVs and airport body scanners—surveillance technologies that are legitimized as innocuous, yet essential to ensuring global security. These uses of cameras and video to capture the private and public activities of everyday people have become so prevalent as to lend a cloak of social and political invisibility to the act of seeing. *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance, and the Camera Since 1870*, the illustrated catalogue accompanying the exhibition of the same title, maps the history of the camera and its pervasive use in illicit, and often explicit, viewing and, thus, exposes the historical processes that have contributed to normalizing surveillance and surveillant viewing in the present moment.

Arranged by San Francisco Museum of Modern Art curator Sandra S. Phillips, the exhibition toured from the Tate Modern in London, to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, then finally to the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis in the period from May 2010 to September 2011. Beautifully illustrated with over 230 photographs that span from the late 19th century to the present day, this exhibition's catalogue, edited by Phillips, is divided into five main thematic sections: The Unseen Photographer, Voyeurism and Desire, Celebrity and the Public Gaze, Witnessing Violence, and Surveillance. Along with an introduction that outlines the historical role of photography in voyeuristic looking, Phillips writes a short article to frame each section, elucidating the histories and moments in the development of the camera that help situate the subsequent photographs. Phillips' short introductions are supplemented by a series of five essays at the end of the catalogue—written by curators and critics from England, France and the U.S.—that explore further the role of the camera in structuring that which is available to be viewed.

Taken as a whole, *Exposed* presents a broad historical overview of the development of the technology and social uses of the camera, a theme discussed in Tate curator Simon Baker's essay "Up Periscope! Photography and the Surreptitious Image." Juxtaposing historical and contemporary visual examples, the materials included in this catalogue situate these social uses in reference to the ability and desire to capture people and events secretly. The written and visual pieces trace the history of photographer-as-voyeur, highlighting the photographer's interest in recording people in their unscripted moments rather than in posed portraits. This fascination to catch people unawares helps ward off the fears of isolation, alienation and solipsism—as if someone else's personal and vulnerable moments can reveal a fragment of the human condition and, possibly, hopefully, a piece of the photographer and viewer themselves, ideas touched upon in Washington, D.C. curator Philip Brookman's essay on modes of filmic and surveillant viewing, "A Window on the World: Street Photography and the Theatre of Life."

The photographs included in the catalogue reveal the types of objects that have been of interest as subject matter in a variety of time periods, placing works by contemporary artists such as Sophie Calle and Nan Goldin alongside photographs by early 20th-century photographers including Walker Evans and Brassäi, and images by mid 20th-century documentarians Abraham Zapruder and the Associated Press. Some of the images included in the catalogue develop the theme of photographer-as-voyeur in terms of the photographer's desire to view and depict moments that present sinister elements of the human condition, as with William Saunder's *Chinese Execution* (1860s) and Susan Meiselas's image of a Nicaraguan site used for assassinations (1981). The underlying theme of all these images and the desire of those to capture them are questions regarding the artistic, political and moral implications of memorializing moments of people's lives (or deaths) without their permission.

There is an added dimension of viewing the historical development of the desires of the photographer-as-voyeur and what is deemed of interest to capture as a transient moment in a permanent way. The written and visual examples provided in the catalogue map not only the images to be viewed, but also the way in which we, as viewers, see the purposes and processes of viewing itself. That is, the historical progression of voyeuristic and surveillance photographs displayed in this catalogue makes apparent the technologies and images that have helped to legitimate and normalize particular modes of vision and visibility. In fact, this overview outlines the social and historical constitution of the surveillant gaze as a new form of visibility.

Early 20th-century aerial photographs from the United States Army Service as well as British surveillance photographs of "militant suffragettes" are brought into social

and historical focus through their juxtaposition with contemporary artworks, such as Emily Jacir's *linz diary* (2003) and Harun Farocki's *Eye/Machine II* (2002). As Jeu de Paume director Marta Gill argues in her essay "From Observation to Surveillance," artworks such as these attempt to "generate tension by questioning the boundaries between public and private, subject and object" (242), as well as help articulate the development of this new visuality, which naturalizes surveillant viewing as a recognizable and authoritative mode of looking. Addressing and potentially destabilizing this surveillant gaze is especially relevant in the present historical moment, when individual privacy is increasingly sacrificed in the name of collective security and through the infiltration of surveillant viewing into previously-unseen areas of people's lives.

While the concept of viewing and the theme of photographer-as-voyeur are central to this exhibition catalogue, what of the people whose lives are captured in the static permanence of these photographs? This role of the photographic object is a piece of the larger picture that remains slightly out of focus through the written and visual materials in the catalogue. While the concept and identity of "voyeur" is centralized, its opposite, "exhibitionist," is mentioned, but mainly in a secondary role. While the interaction of subject and object is uneven, there can be an active participation on behalf of the photographed and the photographer. The catalogue does engage with this relationship in works such as Shizuka Yokomizo's *Stranger Series* (1998-9), where the artist sent invitations to apartment inhabitants to appear at their window at a certain time, and American critic Richard Woodward's essay, "Dare to be Famous: Self-Exploitation and the Camera," which explores the notion of the agency of the photographic object.

Extending beyond the conventional relationship of active subject and passive object, the interaction of the photographer and the photographed is made particularly overt in reference to the focus on the documentation of the celebrity in Carol Squire's essay "Original Sin: The Birth of the Paparazzo" and images such as Marcello Geppetti's *Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton* (1962) and Nick Ut's picture of Paris Hilton being transported to court (2007). At a time when celebrity careers are made and unmade in the public eye and everyday people are willingly relinquishing their personal and private freedoms to be recorded and studied by states and corporations, the role of those who are captured in photographs cannot be sidelined.

Visual objects and the people who produce them cannot be viewed as occupying a space outside of or above social processes, but must be situated as operating within the politics, policies and technologies of a space and time. As a broad overview of the technological and social histories of photography, *Exposed* provides a helpful

entry-point into more detailed and critical examinations of who is viewing, who is viewed and for what purposes, as well as of the ways in which visual objects not only legitimate, but also constitute, historical and contemporary modes of vision and visibility.

Susan Cahill is a PhD Candidate and Teaching Fellow in the Department of Art at Queen's University, Kingston. Susan's academic interests include museum and visual studies, cultural theory, conflict history and surveillance. Her dissertation examines the intersections of visual and material culture with national/ist narratives and military history in Canada and Australia between 2001 and 2011. She is the founding co-editor of the online journal *Shift: Graduate Journal of Visual and Material Culture*.