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Art Projects That Toe the Line Between Sharing and Surveillance

by **Jeremy Polacek** on July 24, 2015

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Installation view of 'Profiled: Surveillance of a Sharing Society' with, from left to right: Paolo Cirio, "Street Ghosts" (2012); Willem Popelier, "Obscured Classified Document (Situation Room)" (2012); Paolo Cirio and Alessandro Ludovico, "Face to Facebook" (2011); Julia Scher, "Mothers Under Surveillance" (1993); Willem Popelier, "Showroom Girls 3" (2011) (all photos courtesy apexart unless otherwise noted)

This is going to sound absurd, but: who watches the watchers of the watchmen? It would be nice if surveillance, control, and privacy were simple issues, but they are not, as apexart's panoptic *Profiled: Surveillance of a Sharing Society* lets you know, veering between the mundane and the surprising. Surveillance and social media, or what curator Mary Coyne calls "The Society of Surveillance," are often just the beginning of a long, strange, perverse trip.

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Watching stirs a weird reflexiveness. The watcher can be a friend on Facebook, a stalker, or an NSA spy. The watcher of the watchmen can be a valiant hero or a criminal. Edward Snowden's ghost hovers over the show, which features works by [James Bridle](#), [Paolo Cirio](#) and [Alessandro Ludovico](#), [Jenny Odell](#), [Willem Popelier](#), [Julia Scher](#), and [Jens Sundheim](#).

Sundheim's ongoing series, *The Traveller* (begun in 2001), features the artist in images from around the world, arms akimbo, legs spread apart, looking into the camera. There he is in a bar in Germany, a gym in Russia, a church in France, on a street corner in Singapore. Sundheim poses for CCTV cameras and Bernhard Reuss, his partner in *The Traveller*, uses a computer to patch in and grab screenshots from the CCTV's stream. Wherever the lidless eye of the CCTV camera peers out, there is Sundheim peering in—exposing the pervasive reach of surveillance, the colonization of privacy, the peculiarity of looking back. It becomes eerily easy to spot Sundheim across the hundreds of photos. It's as if the camera is following him, or he is a wraith haunting its gaze. "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster," Friedrich Nietzsche warned so long ago. (Sundheim was once [questioned by New York City police](#) for suspicious behavior after looking back at a camera on Roosevelt Drive.)



Julia Scher, "Mothers Under Surveillance" (1993, left) and Willem Popelier, "Showroom Girls 3" (2011,

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Cirio and Ludovico's "Face to Facebook" (2011) also earned the pair a few threats, lawsuits, and accusations of being monsters. Sourcing ("stealing") one million profiles from the social media juggernaut, the pair created a [fake dating website](#) populated with these photos (which have since been taken down). The exhibition includes an email exchange between the artists and Facebook, which threatened the pair with a lawsuit for allegedly violating numerous laws and terms of service — which Cirio, Ludovico, and their attorneys disputed, pointing out that the images were available to anyone, even non-users. Corporate-enabled ubiquity and non-privacy has a friend in our desire to share in and be connected with the lives of others. Projects like Cirio and Ludovico's force us to ask the question: what is wanted and unwanted when it comes to being seen?



The author in Julia Scher's "Mothers Under Surveillance" (1993) (photo by the author)

The tension between sharing and being shared, watching and being watched recurs throughout *Profiled*, though nowhere is it as extreme as in "Face to Facebook." By contrast, Scher's "Mothers Under Surveillance" (1993) works like a provocative and prescient jack-in-the-box. Flitting through images of surveillance footage (in this case, of older women in a retirement center), the sly piece flips the script and the lens, turning the camera on the viewer, now being filmed and presented onscreen. The watcher can simultaneously be the watched. (Art-goers take note: apexart, like many galleries and museums, has CCTV cameras in its space. You're being watched.)

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Odell's "All the People on Google Earth" (2012) draws from Google Earth, scrubbing out everything that is not a person. Yet the resulting images are bug-like, with long skeins of people that look quite like ant trails. Viewed this way, from the eye of Google, are we people or are we something less? And what can they see that we cannot? The latter is a question also posed by Popelier's "Obscured Classified Document (Situation Room)" (2012), which enlarges an obscured document from the iconic image of President Barack Obama and his team during the [killing of Osama bin Ladin](#). In a time of so much access, it's easy to forget that so much of what we see has been filtered, censored, and controlled.

To answer the opening question, then: who watches the watchers of the watchmen? Apexart; visitors to *Profiled*; and, most likely, you. The exhibition is a canny, spiraling look at surveillance and the sharing culture. It's wise, but it's also open-eyed, seeing a web where others see a line. Here, it's not so much a question of Big Brother but rather the Big Extended Family — all of it loving, prying, and sharing, but also sometimes overbearing and over-staring.



Jenny Odell, "All the People on Pier 39" (2011)

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Willem Popelier, "Obscured Classified Document (Situation Room)" (2012)

Profiled: Surveillance of a Sharing Society continues through July 25 at [apexart](#) (291 Church Street, Tribeca, Manhattan).

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