



Performance Artist:

The film which undergirds this project was created from “surveillance” footage taken with personal digital devices and submitted by viewers of my durational (five hour) performance at Montalvo Arts Center. The submitted footage was reassembled as a completed film and renamed **Surveillance Like a Hollywood Movie**. The original performance in three parts was called “Where Does the Blue Sky Start/Ghosting/Witness This.” The entire live performance was inspired by my quest to perform “The Souls of Black Folk” by W.E.B. Du Bois. The combined pieces - the performance and the film generated - question personal and technical systems that impact and result in surveillance, myth making, subjectivity, objectivity and authorship.

Digital Media Artist:

Thank you for this introduction to the work. I feel like I should first, as you did, introduce the process that made my image which overlays yours; going second means I can't help but think across both texts, and the works we've juxtaposed. The overlays come from **Unburning**, a series of operational images that visually separate overlays from FBI aerial surveillance video documentation of the Baltimore Uprising in 2005, which followed the death of Freddie Gray in police custody. This separation is an attempt to make legible a technical and institutional apparatus of subjection. My initial motivation was to make surveillance visible, but to hide the surveilled by making pixels from the underlying video transparent while rendering "burned in" sensor data as opaque. The goal here is less to make the data legible than to perform this separation. My intent is not erasure, but a restorative concealment inspired by Simone Browne's writing on *dark sousveillance*, which she describes as an "imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance, a critique that takes form in antisurveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices."

Performance Artist:

I think we were both blown away when we overlaid your images on mine, and the images merged into something that looked like a daguerreotype. I was instantly taken back to "With From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried," a photographic exhibition by Carrie Mae Weems. Briefly, in this exhibition Weems used a selection

of found 1850 daguerreotypes which she altered to question identity and witnessing.

My physical action in the piece incorporates elements of African American vernacular dance or, depending on how you look at it, labor on a plantation or a low wage job, where movement is limited and repetitive. In my piece, I am negotiating with and shifting the soil within a confined space. Embodying and in conversation with past and present, public and private, personal and political, flesh and haunt.

Digital Media Artist:

Unburning operates at an uncomfortable distance, literally in the sense of the camera/sensor flying high above those protesting on behalf of Black lives, but also in the sense that these computational operations and the images produced by **Unburning** are each abstracted from the urgency of this event. I'm particularly struck by the juxtaposition of the "up in the air" position of **Unburning** with the "hands in the soil" of *Like a Hollywood Movie*. In both projects, I recognize gazes both within and upon the work and a commitment to unpacking how past injustices reside in — and haunt — material things.

Performance Artist:

As a person who lives inside the experience which these two pieces evoke (individually and together) ...the distance is always uncomfortable. I see here at least three performances to contend with. There is palpable energy between these

acts of observation. Performing the work and now viewing the work, I feel a loop of performance and oppression that evokes life 300 years ago and today. The vehicle that many African Americans are stopped in is this enclosed room: the solarium where there is no privacy and the body is vulnerable. That vulnerability is not the effect of having broken a law: the vulnerability is the still affect of images burned into our national psyche. Inside this durational work, I am pointing to the temporality of contemporary and historical Black life. By performing in a solarium within a mansion - also a vehicle as its architecture suggests mobility, I am pointing to the surveillance economy of that historical time. Plantation systems' surveillance and today's economy of Baltimore, Sacramento, Boston (the list goes on...) and the systems of the poverty economy: all of these systems are echoed within my work.

As I write this now, I recall the controversy that Weems's exhibition ignited. That controversy, while not the same as our own project which we are discussing, is related to what we were beginning to question.

Specifically, we both began to wonder how we could - through our art - ignite conversations and political action without engaging in what we were calling 'violence porn.' Gazing upon carnage and enacting violence is one of our many national addictions. How do we 'unburn' that addiction? I began to see the marvelous double meaning in the title of your work. A double meaning that came to me because I am living that experience both as subject and object. In an interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III, C.S. Soong makes the following query:

If Orlando Patterson, who is a sociologist at Harvard, argues that Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation forced labor is not a defining characteristic of slavery, if he says that naked violence is one of the key elements of social death, which is slavery, and if the violence directed at Blacks is not based on, as you said, this person transgressing in some way, being disobedient in some way, refusing to consent in some way to what the ruling class thinks or does, then why is violence freely directed at Blacks?

With the internet firmly in our culture, I think about how violence is directed at me/African Americans. I suggest that the 'violence porn' images of African Americans dying in the streets is violence; it is terrorism by another name; it is a psychic terror that impacts the victim the same way it does the perpetrator. I wonder if the new plantation system, by way of how it generates profits, by capitalizing on showing these images (surveillance economy), is the internet?

Digital Media Artist:

My own life has been pretty insulated from the experiences evoked by these pieces, but when I read the FBI's tweet announcing that they had published the surveillance footage, I felt very much caught in it: complicit in the way that democracy distributes (and dissipates) responsibility for its abuses across its citizens, subjects, and targets. I was confused why this footage was being featured in the collections of File Vault (which contains very little video — mostly featuring PDFs of files relating

to dead celebrities and famous criminals) and being promoted on Twitter. I have been unable to determine who makes the decision of what gets shared in this way and what does not. Decisions about what gets seen and what doesn't can have enormous stakes. I have been thinking a lot about Harun Farocki's introduction to his 1968 film "Inextinguishable Fire": "When we show you pictures of napalm victims, you'll shut your eyes. You'll close your eyes to the pictures. Then you'll close them to the memory. And then you'll close your eyes to the facts [...] When napalm is burning, it is too late to extinguish it. You have to fight napalm where it is produced: in the factories." This aerial surveillance footage isn't horrific in the way that pictures of a napalm victim are, or footage of police violence captured by body cams or witness's phones. It's too slow, distant, and durational to go viral. It still documents — and constitutes — violence: violence inflicted upon an uprising against police violence. I think that it is still a kind of violence porn, but a kind that requires different tools to understand.

If we are to fight images like these, we need to understand where they are produced. Uncovering traces of metadata, I can follow this media to a Wescam sensor attached to a manned fixed wing Cessna with the tail code N859JA circling over Baltimore just after midnight ten days after Freddie Gray died, the night after his funeral, but also to an Adobe Premiere project file saved to the desktop folder on an analyst's Windows computer almost a year later (the analyst's name is Meredith). But as **Surveillance Like a Hollywood Movie** communicates, the social and historical

forces that produced and reproduced this assemblage of gazes were not made in factories but in plantations. [am I reading this right?]

Performance Artist:

Yes, that is what I am suggesting.

Digital Media Artist:

The gaze of a forward-looking infrared sensor can only see what is in front of it. It captures images of bodies, vehicles, buildings, and streets. Beneath all of this is ground. And so I see your performance through a spatial poetics of “getting at what’s underneath”. The work with the earth evokes un- and re-burial (like un- and re-burning?).

I was wondering if you would expand on the role of soil in the piece, and the invocation of ghosts?

Performance Artist:

Let's take that question up in a longer piece, shall we?

Bibliography

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