

# Christina Battle: Filing Memory

If I am left alone, I freely act within the limits of my power: there are no rights here. There are no rights either in a case when my action meets some impersonal natural actor, which can be only an accidental limit on my *power*. Rights exist only when my free action meets a free action of another person. Here, in relation to that other person, my freedom which originally expressed only my *power* is affirmed by me as my *right*, that is, as something which another person is obliged to recognize, and the recognition is obligatory because, if freedom is equally the property of any person, then by denying freedom to another person I lose the objective foundation for my own freedom.

Alexander V. Avakov, *Plato's Dreams Realized: Surveillance and Citizen Rights from KGB to FBI*, 2007

L'exercice de la discipline suppose un dispositif qui contraigne par le jeu du regard; un appareil où les techniques qui permettent de voir induisent des effets de pouvoir, et où, en retour, les moyens de coercition rendent clairement visibles ceux sur qui ils s'appliquent.

Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir : naissance de la prison*, 1970

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This past summer's publication by the organization WikiLeaks of approximately 90,000 pages of classified material chronicled another side to the war in Afghanistan. The documents were released with the interest of giving maximum exposure to the issues of unjustified aggressions in the nine-year war, a war that US citizen's tax dollars are funding. Critics of WikiLeaks's, including the White House, wrote that the leak jeopardized operations and endangered the privacy rights of others. These critics judged Wikileaks' acts as self-promotion.<sup>1</sup> Indeed WikiLeaks had withheld some 15,000 documents from the archive as part of its "harm minimization process." This instance of 'curating public memory' raises important questions about accountability and the selective process by which public information is shared. Whose interests should public information serve? Public memory is important because every memory exists in relation to what has been shared with others in specific contexts. What happens when memories are selectively generated? What roles do public institutions (Museums included) have in this process, especially given that they contribute to the formation, interpretation and preservation of social values through their own process of selective collecting?

Today there is a notable increase in information infrastructures that assist in the classification and processing of personal data. What is the function of everyday surveillance, and what are its benefits when we know that the proliferation of new technological screens (such as Facebook) compete with one another through mass media to influence public perceptions and to sell the images of who we should emulate. As more and more of the private spills into the public realm, and a generalized blurring of identity happens, what does this mean for the growing cultural and ethnic pluralization of societies?

The exhibition project *Filing Memory* investigates the intersection of surveillance, archival systems and public memory. It is a solo exhibition project organized around the work of Denver-based Canadian artist Christina Battle and her recent three screen video installation *Wandering through Secret Storms*. In this work, Battle 'exposes' a preemptive social institution, the Federal Bureau of Investigations. By creating a narrative of incredibility around the FBI's declassified files, Battle problematizes the status of the FBI files as 'truth', and makes the viewer suspicious of how institutionalized productions of memory are made. All of the documents she has chosen contain blackened out sentences that render the content incoherent and banal. On each side,

scenes from Cold War epoch educational films from the Prelinger Archives, (now part of the public domain) show sequences of women filing information away into cabinets, physically embodying the role of 'good administrator'. Amplified by slow motion, the choreographed movement of the office workers in the gendered space of the male office environment brings forward a reflection on capitalism, patriarchy and codes of conduct. The aura of generalized paranoia is accentuated by a buzzing audio soundtrack and the interruption of the choreographed movements with animations of birds, thinly outlined in white against a stark, pure black background that evokes the constantly watching eyes of 'Big Brother'.

The exhibition surrounds the work, creating a multidirectional context and feel that resists linearity and chronology. Artefacts like telephones from private collections, and radios, cameras and other devices from the public collections of the local Colby Curtis Museum in Stanstead are joined with 18<sup>th</sup> century books on codes of conduct from the Bishop's University Collection of Rare Cooks. These artefacts, alongside reproductions of war propaganda posters hidden inside a retired card catalogue (previously used in the Bishop's University John Bassett Library), call the present moment of hyper-surveillance into action and force us to *remember*. We are told via labels that most of the telephones belonged to local citizens of the Eastern Townships. Their presence in the context of Battle's anxiety-inducing video installation may short circuit contemporary flows of history, opening up a space within the exhibit to remember forgotten and suppressed histories of technology and surveillance.

From the 18th century onward, regulation of everyday communication was becoming a serious matter. Philosophers like Hobbes, Rousseau and Kant, worked towards definitions of how the new public sphere should function and be organized, including in its codes of conduct. Early records show that current legislation regarding communications, recording, and wiretapping had its roots deep in the 19th century, when nations began to organize their political economies around communication and using this logic to shape the function of their social institutions. In 1919, for example, the General Intelligence Division, a political section of the Justice Department, was formed under J. Edgar Hoover to collect facts, to spy and to verify internal security records. This archive of security documentation grew to 450,000 indiscriminantly indexed accounts.<sup>2</sup> Part of the task for the Division that would later become the FBI – was as an instrument to order the knowledge of the past, to control communication at a time of rapid technological advancement, and to regulate what could be considered public memory in the context of the Cold War.

If we think that museums as public institutions are now in the business of memory production – of interpreting through expository juxtapositions chosen moments of the past or present – certain questions become pertinent. Are there ethical ways to do this work? Can exhibitions that encourage critical memory help give voice to individual stories of masses of private memories representing different flows of communication? If critical museum work is to be one of engagement, then there are choices of what we as curators exhibit, and *how* we exhibit. Exhibitions, as vehicles for the investigation of the politics of public memory, can play a part in the process that happens between memory and amnesia. Likewise, these types of experimental exhibitions can also deepen the relation between viewers and artworks by situating them in highly resonate contexts that open up spaces for the viewer to construct new meanings and values, and, indeed, new remembrances.<sup>3</sup>

Vicky Chainey Gagnon, Exhibition Curator

#### Endnotes:

1. Eric Schmitt, "In Disclosing Secret Documents, WikiLeaks Seeks 'Transparency'", published July 25, 2010,

([http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/26/world/26wiki.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/26/world/26wiki.html?_r=1)); See also: Glenn Greenwald, "The WikiLeaks Afghanistan leak", published July 25, 2010, ([http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn\\_greenwald/2010/07/25/wikileaks](http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2010/07/25/wikileaks)).

2. Alexander V. Avakov, *Plato's Dreams Realized: Surveillance and Citizen Rights from KGB to FBI*, New York: Algora, 2007: 37.

2. This is the thesis of the author's present doctoral research, underway since 2008, on the possibilities of a civically engaged museology.

### **Community Art Lab Questions:**

1. How do our society values of liberty and security impede on one another?
2. Considering the unstoppable market for reality TV, why do we have such a strong desire to watch others and be watched?
3. With archives and museums acting as recorders of public memory, what is not being collected or shared, and why?
4. How has fear and paranoia been used by the government to justify public surveillance? Have we embraced our loss of privacy with patriotic vigor?
5. If Orwell's 1984 was merely a rehearsal for today's surveillance technologies, where do we go from here?