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READY FOR MY CLOSE-UP

Oakwood Apartments

By David Commander

Surveillance Project and the Black Psyche

By M. Lamar

Special Effects festival

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The surveillance state, by its necessity, by its very existence, breeds conformity, because when human beings know that they're always susceptible to being watched, even if they're not being watched, the choices that they make are far more constrained, are far more limited, cling far more closely to orthodoxy, than when they can act in the private realm.

—Glenn Greenwald, keynote lecture to Chaos Communication Congress (2013)

Surveillance is only a symptom of the new hyper-narcissism that has infected our collective reality tunnels. We invite the surveillance cameras into our homes because they are proof that someone is paying attention to us.

—Moxie Mezcál, *Concrete Underground* (2010)

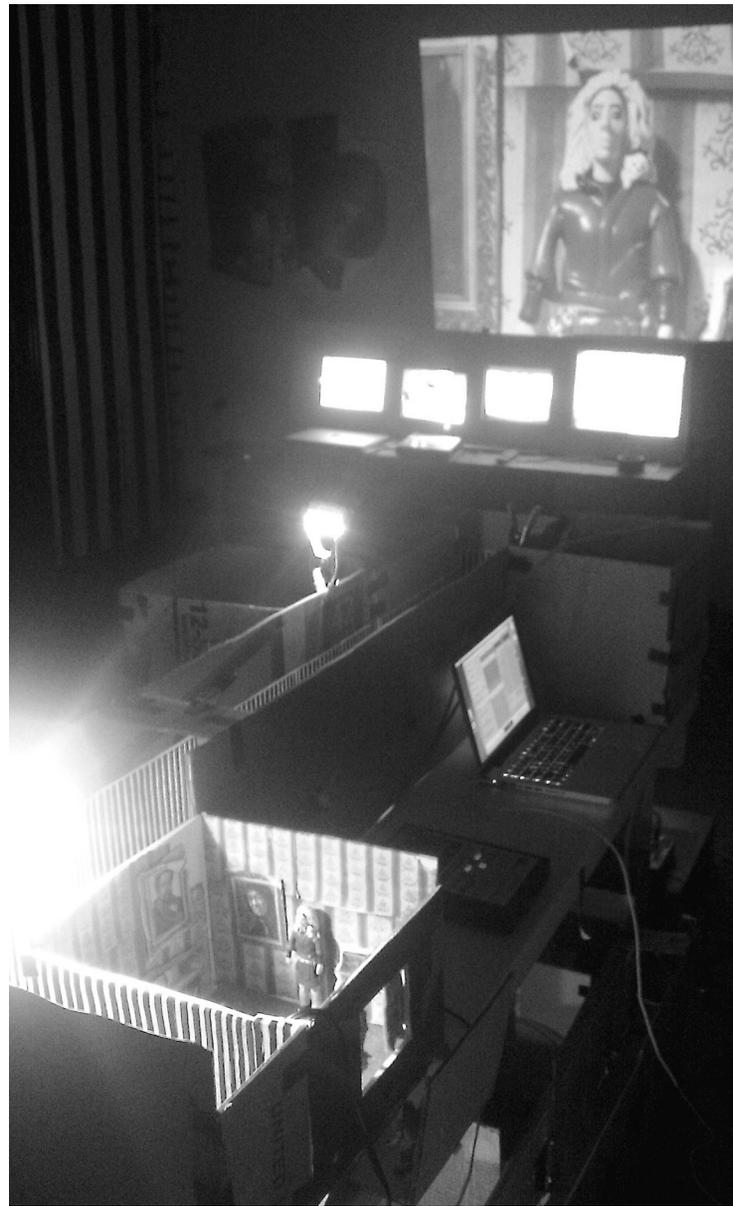
It is often difficult to tell whether the zeitgeist of a particular moment emerges from genuinely new phenomena or, rather, becomes salient as familiar experiences viewed through a new lens. In the case of widespread revelations of domestic data tracking and contemporary surveillance culture, the answer may well be both. Since Glenn Greenwald published Edward Snowden's documents on the National Security Agency's global digital data collection program in June 2013, anxieties about life in a ubiquitous surveillance state have proliferated in mainstream media journalism, political discourse, and nearly every aspect of contemporary culture. Surveillance has been the topic of nearly a thousand individual news reports, and its imagery—of surveillance cameras, drones, and alleged NSA data centers—has proliferated among popular culture advertising, late-night talk-show jokes, and Internet memes.¹

Emerging almost a decade after the launch of Facebook, Twitter, and other widespread social media, digital technologies—whether willingly engaged or intru-

sively spying—have turned even the most quotidian daily events into potential performances to be enacted, documented via digital devices, and shared in online networks. Although it is tempting to read many contemporary performances within this context, two recent works in the newly formed Special Effects performance festival compellingly capture nuances of an American surveillance state and, more significantly, explore the historical and social implications of surveillance not just as a technological intrusion but as a site of cultural transformation.

Playing up the similarities between public video surveillance and social media self-disclosure, David Commander's *Oakwood Apartments* presents a real-time video performance—in miniature—of the strange and often lonely souls living in a doomed community, the Oakwood Apartments. Arranged on tables and floors in the Wild Project's limited lobby, Commander's toy-sized sets are roughly constructed yet densely decorated environments, each representing a different space of the apartment complex. Following prerecorded vocal tracks for each of the characters played on a laptop, Commander manipulates a small handheld video camera through different rooms as we meet Oakwood's resident community. One by one, they relate their experiences and offer varied responses to the imminent destruction of their collective home. The first woman

(played by an action figure of the Star Trek character Deanna Troi) complains about the lack of upkeep of the complex and the decline of the neighborhood more generally. Another resident (some kind of ultramusclad war figure in full battle gear) criticizes the lack of quality food access for him and his family and advocates greater variety in the proliferating vending machines, such as "fruit that kids will eat; like fruit roll-ups." Meanwhile the super in the boiler room pleads with residents to bring all available flammable material ("like the walls") to keep the building's heat going. Reflecting



David Commander's *Oakwood Apartments*, James A. Farley Post Office, New York, 2012. Photo: David Commander

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concerns common to housing struggles in densely populated urban environments, the community's resident activist laments her failed attempts to launch an effective protest, despite "lots of likes on Facebook" for the planned actions. Commander films each of the characters in their respective rooms, at times moving the figure by hand to emphasize a piece of text, or moving the camera to suggest gesture. While we can watch Commander carefully navigate the intricate environments of his small set, the real show looms larger than life on a video screen at one end of the lobby. On the floor nearby, camera monitors display footage of other interiors in the space, showing the static black-and-white footage common to real-time video surveillance.²

Commander's message is not subtle. The onsite school has renamed its sports teams the "Oakwood Walmarks" in appreciation of the store's corporate sponsorship, despite the fact that they no longer receive donated uniforms and must play with shoes taped to their heads. (One character solicits shoe donations from the audience for this purpose.) In a scene familiar to many urban dwellers, the landlord is visible only as a shadow behind a closed door, with ominous music playing in the background. Perhaps the finest moment of the evening comes during a surreal and very funny activation of the local school. Following a lengthy introduction from the lead teacher (an unfamiliar female doll who is missing both hands), the back wall of the school room, complete with chalkboard and child-friendly images, pulls away to reveal a demonic, dark room filled with small naked plastic babies glued to every surface. The babies spin on carnivalesque vertical rotating towers and are pulled through the room on a conveyer belt against a sonic backdrop of noise, pounding music, and high-pitched wailing ostensibly of the babies themselves. Framed in extreme close-ups by Commander's relentless camera, multitudes of identical babies fill the screen with their grotesque blank faces, as he literalizes the fear of factory education.

Those familiar with Big Art Group (with whom Commander has previously performed, and whose cofounders Caden Manson and Jemma Nelson curated the festival) will recognize the techniques of real-time filmmaking and the aesthetics of detritus that constitute both the environments and characters for *Oakwood Apartments*. Even the scenario of a house in decay and under threat of eviction is reminiscent of Big Art's most recent New York performance, *Broke House*, a mash-up of the American housing crisis, trash cinema, and Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.³ Yet the scale of Commander's tiny apartments and our position peering down into the residents' intimate lives remind us that surveillance technology holds particular dangers for vulnerable communities. In Commander's toy theater, we are in the position of dominance, rather than gazing up at the wonders of a Big Art sensorium. We watch the manipulations of battered toys as characters evoke larger manipulations of a system that has already exposed them. Poised on the edge of poverty, these figures hold no illusion that the intrusive camera will improve their lives; they simply take the opportunity to talk to someone—anyone—who might care about them. Despite being broken and ugly—or perhaps

because of this—the toys take on emotional resonance throughout the show. As the embodiment of disposable people, these discarded objects stand in for populations vulnerable both to a superior peering gaze and to an insidious surveillance from within their own walls. While this interior view might seem to provide them with a way to communicate to the outside world, Commander's performance suggests that it may be only one more form of exploitation.

Surveillance as exploitation is similarly at the core of M. Lamar's *Surveillance Project and the Black Psyche*, a dense work that is at once engaging and disturbing, historical, theoretical, and shockingly contemporary despite drawing material from the mid-twentieth and nineteenth centuries. Combining Michel Foucault's theory of the Panopticon with Frantz Fanon's theory of internalized inferiority, Lamar revisits famil-



David Commander's *In Flight*, REFEST, CultureHub, New York, 2013. Photo: Eve Comperiat

iar critiques of the surveillance state (images of CCTV cameras appear throughout) while infusing this discourse with a queer erotics of the gaze and a racial context that is too often minimized or ignored in other considerations. Performing as two different young black men, both of whom were subjected to distinct yet related power structures, Lamar offers a nuanced consideration of surveillance as an American cultural practice with a long, complicated, and violent history. While the recent revelations of government intrusion may seem new, Lamar reminds us that African Americans, gays, and countless "others" have always been watched by their governments. His framing of surveillance at the intersection of racial and sexual politics broadens the meaning of this work beyond superficial ruminations on pervasive government spying to a more profound questioning of how institutional power affects those it oversees and, in particular, how the impact of these visions has affected the African American psyche.

From the first moment, the deceptively simple set is full of contradictions. The

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show opens with a video of Jamie Foxx accepting the Academy Award for Best Actor in *Ray* (2009). A small segment of his acceptance speech plays in which Foxx describes his grandmother's childrearing. The phrase, "she beat me, she whoop me," is extracted from a video clip of Foxx's speech on YouTube.⁴ Foxx's decontextualized phrase is only a few seconds and plays over and over again, intercut sporadically with audience applause and a reaction shot of Morgan Freeman, who looks both surprised and amused at Foxx's words. During this video segment, Lamar enters the theater, descending the aisle in an evening gown, which he promptly trades for an orange jumpsuit and do-rag. Once changed, he sits behind an electric piano (the only physical set to speak of), and the video of Foxx is replaced by black-and-white video of a prison cell interior. Although his clothing has changed, Lamar's elegant bearing remains, as he sits at the piano and sings in a falsetto that is surprisingly dynamic and warm within a melancholy lament that echoes both Delta blues and postmodern minimalism. Playing simple

yet haunting chords, Lamar is surrounded not only by the prison videos but also a live video feed that is layered over the prison images. Other projections include a countdown timer that randomly resets, and digital animations designed by Sabin Calvert: CCTV cameras, Ku Klux Klan hoods, and triangles connecting the surveillance cameras with images of slavery. Aside from the orange jumpsuit,



M. Lamar's
*Surveillance Project
and the Black Psyche*,
Special Effects, New
York, 2014. Photo:
Annie Malamet

the color palette is entirely black and white, reflecting the racial dynamics, emotional emptiness of the prison environment, and the aesthetics of surveillance video.

Within this pastiche of signifiers, Lamar sings his text as Willie Francis, a young black man who was executed for the murder of a white man in St. Martinville, Louisiana, in 1947, and as an unnamed black slave on an 1847 Alabama cotton plantation.⁵ Juxtaposing the two stories, Lamar elegantly points to parallels between them contextualized at the intersection of theory by Michel Foucault and Frantz Fanon. As Francis, Lamar sings of life in prison very much as Foucault described it, repeating the phrase "in my solitude" amid projections of photographs taken from the French philosopher's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977).⁶ Similarly, the voice of the slave describes life under the "overseer," which, like Foucault's example of the prison watchtower, sees all from both a superior height and the privileges of power.

Lamar articulates the mutual experiences of the two men constantly watched and frequently beaten—by guards, klansmen, families—within systems designed to control and dehumanize them.

Lamar links Foucault's critique of surveillance systems with Fanon's theory of oppressed identification in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952, trans. 1967). It is not enough to be put under constant surveillance; both men also unwillingly internalize the oppressors' gaze. Francis sings, for example, "From the watchtower, I look down on myself," characterizing this identification as "the watchtower inside me" and a "white demon possession." We are reminded of Fanon's description of the colonized psyche: "Every colonized people—in other words, every people whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country." In Fanon's account, the colonized person is elevated in relation to her conformity with dominant cultural standards, even if these standards include looking down upon the (black) self.⁷

But Lamar extends the complexity of these relations even further when he introduces queer desire into the narratives. Some historians have speculated about the relationship between Willie Francis and the older Cajun man he allegedly murdered, his employer Andrew Thomas. In his recorded confession, Francis was reported to have given the only motive as, "It was a secret about me and him."⁸ Drawing on the suggestion that Francis and Thomas may have been lovers, Lamar makes these relations explicit in both 1947 and 1847. "Overseer, see me fall for you," he sings. "I freely give what you take from all the other slave boys." Lamar thus both eroticizes the identification with the oppressor and radicalizes its potential for liberation—"With his touch, I felt free"—while still acknowledging the exploitation inherent: "Nasty touch was my first touch." It's a challenging combination, but Lamar does not editorialize or overexplain. Whether the eroticism of domination is seen as perverse, liberatory, or oppressive (or all three simultaneously) remains the decision of the spectator. Other contemporary works have eroticized relations to surveillance, in particular Jill Magid's *Evidence Locker* (2004), Giles Walker's pole-dancing robots in *PEEPSHOW* (2008–9), or even Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), all of which explore the intersection of desire and power inherent within surveillance technologies.⁹

What Lamar does insist upon, however, is the historical continuity of these relations. Perhaps not surprising, the staging for *Surveillance Punishment and the Black Psyche* is credited to Tucker Culbertson, a professor of constitutional law and queer studies. Culbertson's influence is evident throughout. Like the countdown timer that constantly resets itself, the performance's structure is recursive, bringing the past into the present over and over again, effectively conflating the two. Nearly every phrase is sung multiple times, accompanied by repetitive piano chords that echo the slamming clang of closing prison doors. Lamar returns to particular images, phrases, and sounds

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suggesting not only an enduring connection between the two narratives of his characters but also their continued relevance today. “But now is always then. And then is always now,” he laments near the conclusion of the show, noting the return of violent, internalized motifs throughout our America’s histories.

Appropriately, the performance returns to its opening, the most contemporary images of Jamie Foxx, whose story of his grandmother’s beatings is echoed in the songs of both Francis and the Alabama slave. The slave beatings in 1847 continue in Francis’s grandfather beating him and the rest of the grandchildren, and in Jamie Foxx’s account of his grandmother’s discipline (itself replayed on a continuous loop). Surveillance, particularly of black bodies, is an old practice. Whether we can resist or transform this remains to be seen, but perhaps we can take comfort from Fanon’s final manifesto in *Black Skin, White Masks*: “I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny.”¹⁰

Given their critique of contemporary media networks, it is perhaps ironic that Commander, Lamar, and all the other performances at the Special Effects festival emerged from the social media network, contemporaryperformance.org. Curated from an open call over the network, the inaugural festival in 2014 reflects a small offering from the more than 5,300 individual members currently on the network and representing companies from all over the world. As such, the Special Effects festival offers a meaningful contradiction to prevailing worries about the dominance of social media networks as mechanisms for surveillance and thus, as Glenn Greenwald recently claimed, tools of conformity. Surveillance breeds conformity only if we assume the systems are immutable. As Commander and Lamar remind us, all worlds are made and can be endlessly revisioned, as we remix and rework versions of ourselves online and off.

NOTES

1. See, for example, David Von Drehle, “The Surveillance Society,” *Time*, August 1, 2013. While only one such citation, Von Drehle’s characterization of an inevitable surveillance society proliferating through the actions of its users captures much of mainstream journalism’s reaction to the Snowden publications.
2. Indeed, one is reminded of the numerous surveillance camera performances, such as the work of the Surveillance Camera Players and Jill Magid’s *Evidence Locker*, that were designed, at least in part, to relieve the boredom of the security guards forced to watch the empty screens. The SCP cite the episode of the television show *Taxi* where the character Alex Reiger performs in front of the surveillance camera to escape the boredom of his job. See “From Outside the Closed Circuit: The Antecedents of Surveillance Camera Theater,” www.notbored.org/scp-antecedents.html (accessed February 3, 2014).

3. *Broke House* premiered in the Abrons Art Center's American Realness festival in January 2012. It was revived in revised form at Abrons Art Center in April 2012.
4. "Jamie Foxx Winning Best Actor for 'Ray,'" 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2a1nzAciMc&feature=youtube_gdata_player (accessed May 13, 2014). The relevant section of the clip begins at 4:18.
5. Although the execution of black—often innocent—young men was not unusual in 1947 Louisiana, Willie Francis is notable for having been executed twice. The first execution by electric chair failed, allegedly from being improperly connected by a drunken prison employee, and Francis is reported to have screamed repeatedly to stop the current. The horror of its failure was cited (unsuccessfully) in subsequent challenges to execution by electric chair as cruel and unusual punishment. M. Lamar, interview by the author, January 12, 2014. See also Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis: Race, Murder, and the Search for Justice in the American South* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008).
6. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argued for the symbiosis of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon and prison, noting, "The theme of the Panopticon—at once surveillance and observation, security and knowledge, individualization and totalization, isolation and transparency—found in the prison its privilege locus of realization." See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 2012), 249.
7. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 18.
8. King, *Execution of Willie Francis*, 131.
9. See Jill Magid, *Evidence Locker*, 2004, www.jillmagid.net/EvidenceLocker.php (accessed May 13, 2014); Giles Walker, *PEEPSHOW*, 2008, www.gileswalker.org/gileswalker.org/PEEPSHOW/PEEPSHOW.html (accessed May 13, 2014). See also Elise Morrison, "User-Unfriendly Surveillance Art as Participatory Performance," *Theater* 43, no. 3 (2013): 5–23.
10. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 229.

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