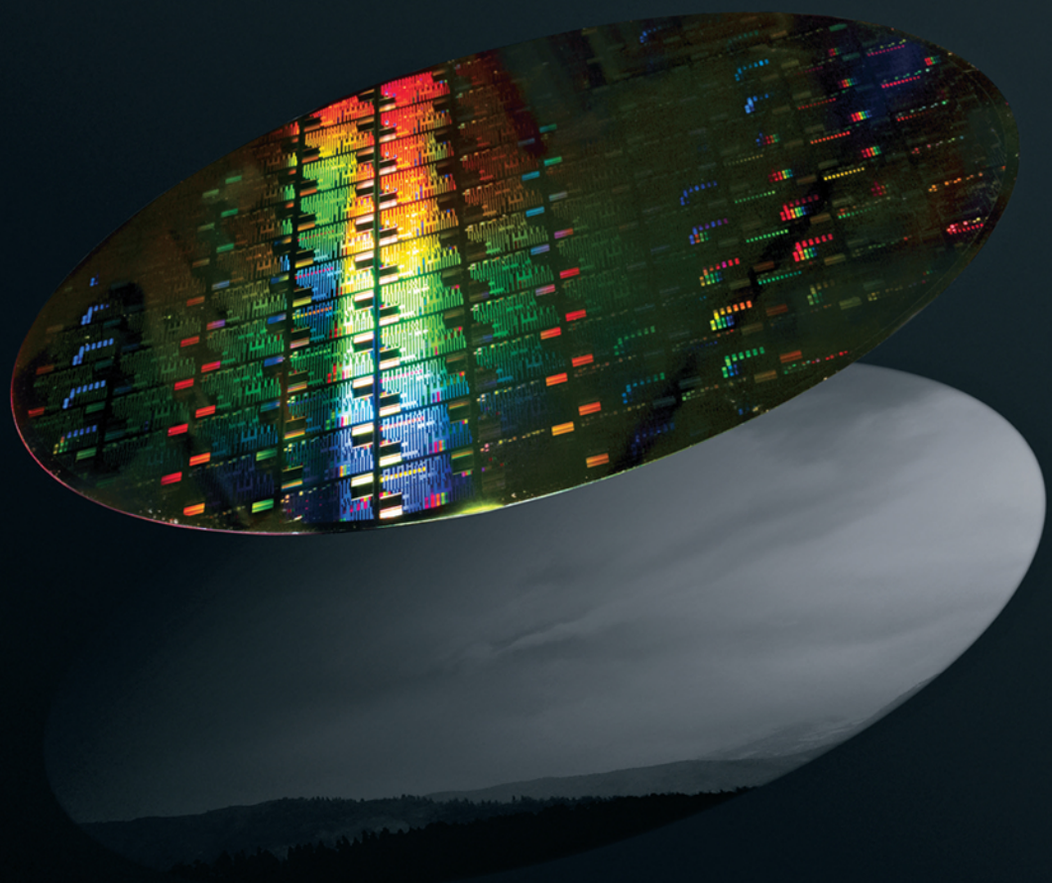
cmagazine120

30 years

Winter 2014

Contemporary Art & Criticism

Christina Battle—Public Studio—Deborah Root
Patricia Reed—Jodi Dean
Heather Dewey-Hagborg—Adam Harvey



Surveillance

Winter 2014

Contemporary Art & Criticism

Surveillance

cmagazine120 —30 years

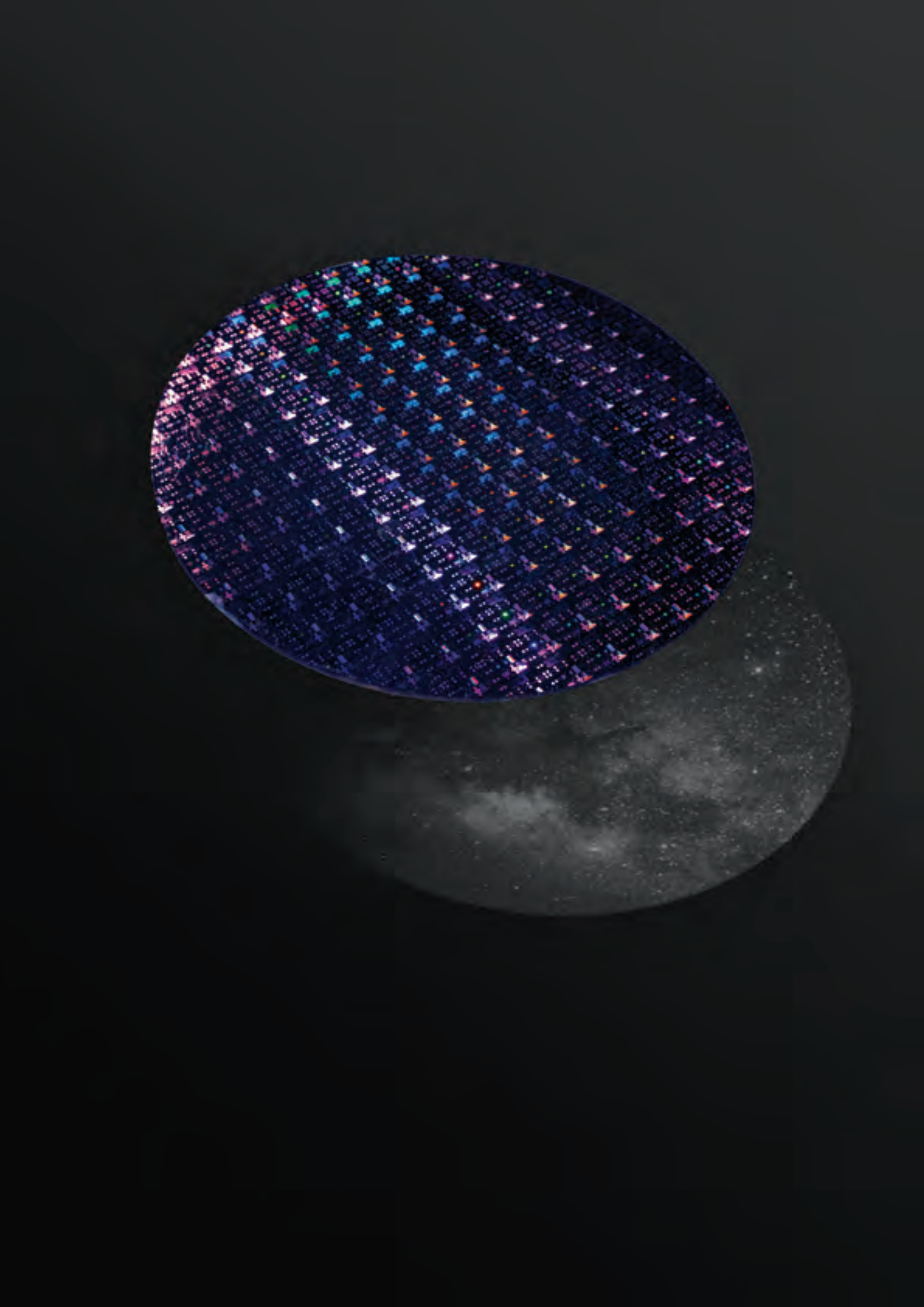
7 72006 83226 7 20

$8.75 — Display until March

18

Seeing the Unseen: An Interview with Public Studio

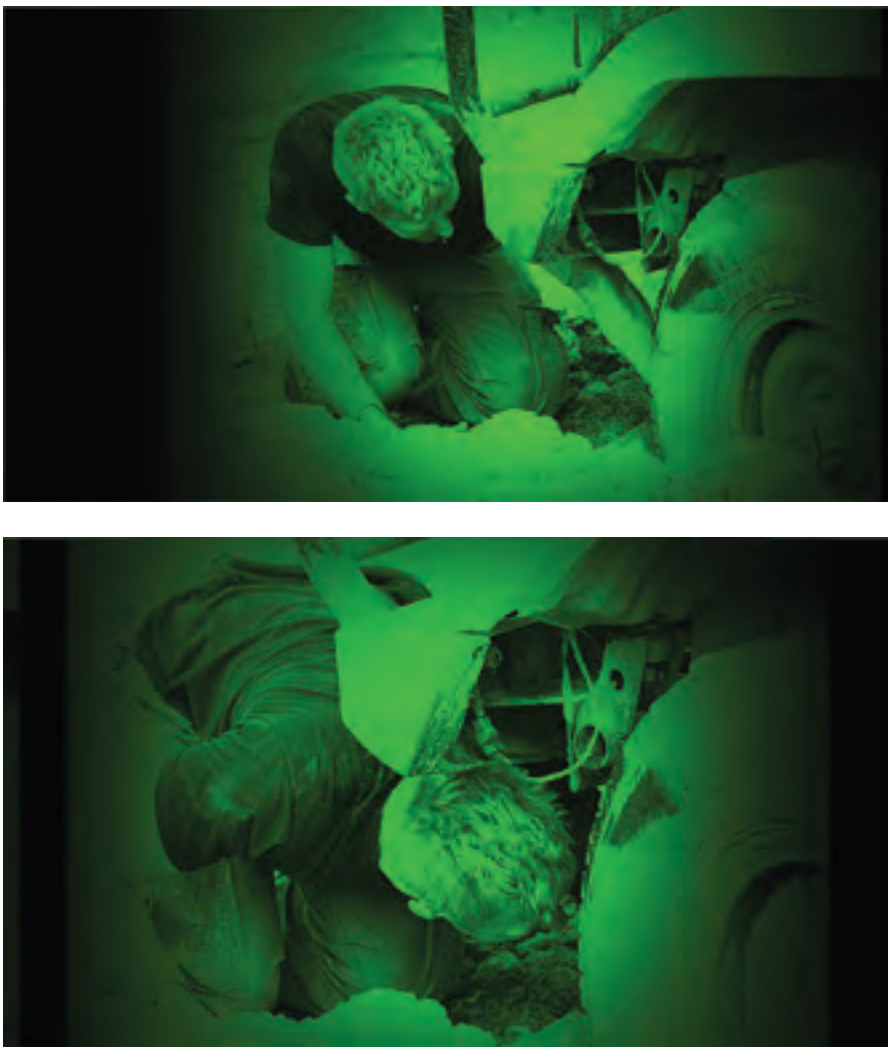
by Nives Hajdin



previous page:
Public Studio, *Untitled 3*, 2013, archival inkjet print, edition 1/4.
IMAGE COURTESY OF PUBLIC STUDIO

The collaborative work of Elle Flanders and Tamara Sawatzky, known as Public Studio, is diverse and idiosyncratic, combining film and architecture to explore the role of images in shaping and understanding everyday conflict in war zones. Their most recent exhibition, *Under the Last Sky*, held at O'Born Contemporary in the autumn of 2013, draws from Flanders' experiences in the Middle East, exploring images of war not readily depicted by the media. The duo's apprehension towards surveillance practices emerges in *Under the Last Sky*, where they have used silicon wafers and photography to address drone activity in remote villages in the Middle East. Nives Hajdin met up with them in Toronto to talk about their work.

Public Studio, *Under the Last Sky*, installation view, 2013, multiple photo-etched silicon wafers on tempered glass and mirror table with printed vinyl on wall beyond.
PHOTO: JESSE BOLES; IMAGE COURTESY OF PUBLIC STUDIO



Public Studio, *Tire Change*, 2013, detail, 2013, printed vinyl, edition of 2.
PHOTO: JESSE BOLES; IMAGE COURTESY OF PUBLIC STUDIO

NH Nives Hajdin

Your current show at O'Born Contemporary, Under the Last Sky, *focuses on photography as well as the role of other technologies in presenting and decoding images. How are these works created and how do they reflect the political nature of your work?*

PS Public Studio

Often, we like to begin by collapsing the false distinctions that are created between aesthetics and politics that in turn generate discrete categories. We see them as the same, both philosophically and pragmatically. We try to create images that inspire and lead to an event or produce communication between other human activities, from economy to politics and all aspects of our social fabric.

These works emanated from a trip we took to Singapore and Indonesia last year. We were asked to present an artist talk and thought it might be interesting to take people through our version of our travels, an artist's reflection of an environment. Singapore felt somewhat sterile and manufactured; it is the largest import-export hub in the world and is the largest centre of logistics. Everything there felt ephemeral, a condition of one of the largest free-market economies with the highest trade-to-GDP ratio in the world today. With no natural resources or arable land to speak of, Singapore appeared as a constructed futuristic city. It is also one of the world's largest manufacturers of silicon wafers and has an extremely sophisticated high-tech weapons industry. Wafers are a thin slice of semiconductor material used in the fabrication of integrated circuits which are then "diced" into individual microcircuits, and used in everything from your camera to a drone. As we see it, they could be understood as the base of the military industrial complex.

Interestingly, the way in which electronic circuits manifest on silicon wafers is through the oldest photographic printing technique known: photolithography. The circuitry is etched onto the wafer through light and chemicals. While this is done in high-tech "cleanrooms," the roots of the process are as old as the history of photography itself. That piqued our interest. We wanted to repeat the etching process but sans cleanroom, which proved difficult. As we discovered, you can't simply throw the wafer in an acid bath and get an image. We ended up having to sandblast the images that you see on the silicon wafers, which still held true to an etching process. The wafers represent for us the collision of the high-tech industry with militarism, that something as seemingly benign as a microchip, and its ability of image capture, translates to surveillance at the most sophisticated and insidious level.

Public Studio with Eshrat Erfanian, *Kino Pravda 3G#1*, 2012. Video still.
PHOTO: JESSE BOLES; IMAGE COURTESY OF PUBLIC STUDIO

NH *What is the significance of the exhibition title,* Under the Last Sky*?*

PS We took the title for the show, *Under the Last Sky*, from a poem by [late] Palestinian Poet Laureate Mahmoud Darwish: "Where should we go after the last frontiers? Where should the birds fly after the last sky?" Heaven and sky are often etymologically synonymous; we think of the skies above as transcendent places of refuge in most religions and cosmologies. But now the sky represents uncertainty, danger and instability. We selected 18 different skies over Afghanistan and Pakistan, each one representative of the sky on the date of the last 18 strikes that killed innocent people. The wafers now serve as meditations on our current landscapes.

NH *Your photography investigates what you call "landscapes as an area of cultural struggles." To what extent do the ideas explored in* Under the Last Sky *reference your experiences in Palestine?*

PS As someone who grew up in a conflict zone, but often with little knowledge of the specific structure and location of that conflict, Elle became increasingly aware of the land and our environment as a site of struggle. As Canadian citizens, we both became aware of and concerned with our government and military's role in the war in Afghanistan and ongoing war against aboriginal peoples and the environment. Landscape as a site of struggle has less to do with "war" as spectacle than as the site where conflict unfolds. In Palestine and Israel, we've been demarcating war as it takes place in the everyday, rather than picturing the blood and bombs that seem to dominate most images of the region. When we lived in Palestine from 2008 to 2009, we were making a film about the segregated road systems in the West Bank (*Road Movie*, 2011) when the Gaza incursion began. While we were certainly aware of Israeli drones flying over Gaza on a daily basis, it was only when we witnessed the swift mass destruction that drones cause that we began to understand their power and insidiousness. Even the sound of drones causes terror in the lives of Palestinian children. Faceless, unmanned warfare, surveillance from above, and the destruction and carnage that they leave below belong to a new paradigm that exposes a logic of speculation. Palestine, as a conflict zone, is a place where the inhabitants no longer have agency over their landscape. In fact, in the final settlement proposals, Israel demanded, and currently has, control of the airspace over the West Bank — unusual as international law states that there should be contiguity between one's land and sky. Israeli architect and scholar Eyal Weizman refers to this as "the politics of verticality." The situation in Pakistan, however, is different in that the US is in violation of Pakistan's territorial integrity and is contravening international law. Drone warfare ultimately also controls landscape as the skies above are no longer benign.

NH *Can you speak more about this preference to represent the everyday, lesser-seen images that exist in war zones?*

PS When you've lived in and visited places like Palestine over many years, you become acutely aware of the repetition that takes place within the narratives that come to represent a place. Imagine if you stripped away every single Western media image of boys throwing rocks at Israeli soldiers, for instance. Or if we removed Middle Eastern media images of the martyred. What would be left and how would we construct the conflict in Israel and Palestine? These images only persist in miring the conflict further and further while the story of an illegal occupation never emerges. The same could be said for Afghanistan and Pakistan and the way in which images of drone strikes only serve to entrench a fragment of a complex story — to the exclusion of all else.

As artists, our job is to use the language of images to unravel the complexities of how ideological frameworks shape what gets seen and what doesn't. For Elle, as a young person growing up in Israel, the dominant narrative was that the land was "'empty," uninhabited, ours for the taking. The saying was "A land without a people for a people without a land." As she became more involved in feminist movements, which lead to peace movements and eventually to Palestinian solidarity, the larger reality revealed itself. We both found it amazing that you can indeed grow up in a place and not see what is right in front of you.

Our strategy is to represent this blind spot through highlighting the unfolding of colonization and subjugation within the everyday, rather than addressing war as spectacle. One of the things one learns most concretely about the occupation of Palestine is that it happens in the most mundane ways. It transpires through the bureaucracies that affect your everyday life: access to education, water, citizenship and economies. Thus, in our new work for *Under the Last Sky*, we don't focus on the spectacularization of bombs falling from unmanned air vehicles, but on the more minute details of how surveillance and warfare is deployed, and what goes into the visual construction of those who are on the ground that allows this process to happen. In other words, how do drone pilots operating from places like Nevada, thousands of miles away, who have a particular worldview, conceive of what is happening on the ground in the mountains of Pakistan? And what is the extension of that, the repercussions in our everyday lives, as it relates to surveillance? We must care that Canada is currently spying on the Brazilian mining and energy industry and that this has absolutely no relationship to "security" but rather is industrial espionage.[1] Many of us who have been active in peace movements, in social justice work and environmentalism know that resources and industry — rather than security and terrorism — are often the reasons for war. Surveillance is everywhere and its implications are far more vast than most of us can begin to imagine.

Public Studio, *Road Movie*, installation view, 2011.
PHOTO: TOM BLANCHARD; IMAGE COURTESY OF O'BORN CONTEMPORARY

Public Studio, *Road Movie*, installation view, 2011.
PHOTO: TOM BLANCHARD; IMAGE COURTESY OF O'BORN CONTEMPORARY

NH *The repetition of imagery, structure and process also appears in the various media you use. One sees different angles caught on surveillance cameras, a series of photographs taken in succession over the course of a journey, geometric ordering of Islamic decoration, and similar instances of repetition. What does this reiteration achieve within the larger scope of your conceptual aims?*

PS Our work is structured by the language of film and architecture. We like rules, patterns, editing and narrative. When you improvise in music, you respond in the moment, but it's based on patterns and mathematical structuring. Conflict zones function similarly: while at times they appear to be total chaos, there is an orchestration to that chaos. This motif can be seen in the first of a series of works we did in collaboration with artist Eshrat Erfanian entitled *Kino Pravda 3G* (2011), where we re-present images of protest almost as if they've been choreographed. If you watch a protest for its duration, you will see there is indeed a pattern, or a choreography. We're not suggesting that everything is so very predictable, but rather we are trying to insert the ideas of consciousness and ideology that play out in conflict.

Through surveillance — specifically its random and all-encompassing collecting of images — governments and corporations search these images for patterns that are embedded in ideology. Our work, in turn, means to reveal those very ideological structures. For example, on a 40-foot vinyl strip that we adhered to the walls of the gallery, we depict images of everyday events that took place in Afghanistan and Pakistan. These "ground images," as we like to think of them in contrast to the "sky images" on the wafers, are manipulated to imply surveillance images. This shifts our perception of these images from being documents of unfettered daily occurrences to being documents of suspicious activities. Manipulated in this way, a man changing a tire on a jeep can now easily be understood to be suspect. The citizen body is the subject of surveillance that is so pervasive that it too generates a kind of chaos that gets resolved through a reordering of codes. These codes — some of which are virtual, some physical — result in translations and mistranslations.

Our work is meant to decode images, to better close the gaps we allow between our use of images and the state's uses of images. Surveillance is part of our everyday, and we wanted to think that through. It is something with which we are both complicit with and far too comfortable. We don't think enough about the consequences of having all our private information completely accessible.

NH Under the Last Sky *also explores the tension between photography and surveillance through the separation of images onto different levels of glass, and in the representation of the invasive practice of infrared photography. How does the traditional photographic image resonate in the face of an increasing global reliance on more advanced digital imaging technologies?*

PS What interested us in this project from the beginning was the fact that what we use to create images belongs to a larger lexicon. Images have always resonated within the rubric of a military-industrial complex. That's not new, but their ubiquity is, and surveillance affects us in our everyday lives with enormous consequences.

The history of photography and images in general has always been of interest to us. How they are read, understood, circulated and reinterpreted is at the core of our practice. The silicon wafers that we produced for this show enshrine these processes. We use images as a way to understand how we interact based on how we interpret what we see. The mirrors at the bottom of our glass table reflect this back to us; they remind us how the assumptions we make can result in devastating consequences and that we are enmeshed in wars that occur elsewhere, whether we like to acknowledge it or not.

Similarly, in the surveillance-style vinyl series we created, we call into question our own positionality as viewers, arguing that depending on where these activities take place, we too read within certain frameworks. Like the drone operator, the viewer is complicit in reading these mundane activities as suspicious. For the drone operator, however, this can result in thousands of deaths with no apparent consequences.

NH *Issues of surveillance have a heightened urgency in society today. How do you situate this investigation within the larger context of your practice as a collective working across various media?*

PS We have different backgrounds as artists. One of us is trained as an architect; the other is a photographer and filmmaker. We start with the investigation of a specific idea or problem, which leads to the development of a concept. The medium we choose tends to reveal itself as the most appropriate vehicle of expression.

Working collectively is something familiar to both of us. Collaboration pushes us in directions we may not take otherwise, especially when our themes revolve around art as social practice or as a vehicle for thinking through the problems we are facing in the world today. Art is part of our social fabric and it only makes sense that we engage others in those conversations. The *Kino Pravda 3G* series, which tracks protest movements around the world, began as a conversation between the two of us and our friend Eshrat Erfanian, who was giving us a blow-by-blow report on the progress of Iran's Green Movement as it took to the streets. The project began just after the 2010 G20 protests in Toronto, when everyone we knew was on the streets, so it became a perfect fit. We collaborated with several artists on that project, reflecting the nature of the social movements that were emerging.

Our film installation *Road Movie* that we created in Palestine would be another example; it began by documenting the apartheid roads in the West Bank for a friend who was writing a report for an NGO. This is how we understand our practice, as concomitant with the political. Art practice and the political are not separate spheres. Political philosopher Chantal Mouffe argues that every form of art has a political dimension, in that it emerges out of any relation. When something is named "political art," it ghettoizes it and suggests that it opposes an "other art" or a "real art." The result is the disempowerment of all art practice. Suffice it to say, perhaps in this present time, when there is a need to cogently restructure the world around us, collaborative and collective practice only makes sense.*

Endnotes

1 James Fitz-Morris, "Why Would Canada Spy on Brazil Mining and Energy Officials?" *CBC News* (October 9, 2013). Accessed October 28, 2013. http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/why-would-canada-spy-on-brazil-mining- and-energy-officials-1.1931465.

Bios

Nives Hajdin is a Toronto-based writer and curator. Her research examines art interventions in the public sphere and her writing has appeared in *Canadian Art*. She was also the publication coordinator for Luis Jacob's recent book, *Commerce by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 2011), and is currently an MFA candidate in Criticism and Curatorial Practice at OCAD University, where she is developing an exhibition that investigates the effects of social surveillance in contemporary society.

Public Studio is the collaborative art practice of Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky. They are the recipients of the 2013 Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts Award. **Flanders** is a filmmaker and artist raised in Montreal and Jerusalem. She holds both an MA in Critical Theory and an MFA from Rutgers University. She is an alumnus of the Whitney Independent Study Program and a PhD candidate in the Visual Arts Studio Program at York University where she also teaches. **Sawatzky** is an architect and artist from Winnipeg. She worked for the award-winning firm MacLennan Jaunkalns Miller Architects from 1998–2010. In 2010, she founded Public Studio Architecture. Their work has been screened and exhibited at the MoMA, the MOCCA, the AGYU, Flux Factory, The Berlinale, TIFF and international festivals.