Elise Morrison
Media Matters Position Paper
ATHE 2010

One of the most significant areas of growth in the realm of new media within the spheres of theatre and performance, as well as in the techno-social everyday, has been in the arena of surveillance. A growing number of theatre and performance artists have employed technologies and techniques of surveillance within their work, building a significant genre of new media performance – 'surveillance art' or 'surveillance theatre' – that tracks and challenges socio-political responses to the ever-changing structures and technologies of surveillance in the US and internationally. By appropriating surveillance technologies from military, state, and consumer markets into public and private spaces of performance, 'surveillance artists' re-contextualize these technologies and the power dynamics that historically attend them, provoking critical inquiry of the disciplinary function and human-technology interface of surveillance, and challenging habits of representation and reception in theatre and performance.

In this brief paper, I describe Edit Kaldor's *Point Blank*, one of the representative surveillance theatre pieces that I discuss in my larger dissertation project.[1] I employ Jay Bolter and Grusin's concept of 'remediation' to show how surveillance theatre artists such as Kaldor strategically interrogate the ways in which paradigms of theatre and of surveillance

---

[1] *Point Blank* joins a growing number of surveillance theatre works that include the Shunt Collective's *Contains Violence* (2008), The Wax Factory's *Quartet v. 4.0* (2010; and *v. 1.0*, 2002), Juggernaut Theatre's *Oh What War* (2008), theatre two point oh #'s *Surveillance* (2008), Big Picture Group's *True + False* (2007), The Builder's Association's *supervision* (2006), Rebecca Schneider's *The Blind* (2007), Simon McBurney's *Measure for Measure* (2004), and the Living Theatre in collaboration with Surveillance Camera Players: *Not in My Name* (2000).

have materially and symbolically shaped each other, both in historical and contemporary contexts. However, in my analysis, 'remediation' comes to function in the context of surveillance theatre not only as "the representation of one medium in another," as Bolter and Grusin define it[2], but also as a means by which to 're-teach' contemporary audiences about the power dynamics, histories, and habitual assumptions that construct contemporary understandings of and responses to socio-political surveillance and theatre.[3]

In *Point Blank*, surreptitious photography – a central technique of surveillance for nearly a century and half now – is represented within a theatrical context in such as way as to remediate cultural assumptions about the universality and stability of evidence gained from surveillance data. By framing surveillance "evidence" within theatrical "fictions," Edit Kaldor challenges the common assumption – which stems from modernist representations of candid photography – that surveillance technologies can provide evidentiary indices of the real (or in some way capture "what really happened") in such a way that theatre cannot. Kaldor capitalizes on the slippery and unstable relationship between the real and the representational that has been historically associated with the concept of theatricality in order to strategically remediate cultural assumptions about the 'truth value' of surveillance data.

---

[2] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation* (MIT Press: 1999). In their genealogical analysis of remediation from the Renaissance to the present, Bolter and Grusin sustain that representational media have always emerged through processes of remediation, arguing that photography remediated perspectival painting, film remediated stage production and photography, and television remediated film, vaudeville, and radio (59-60). Bolter and Grusin use the concept of 'remediation' to articulate developmental narratives of new visual media, asserting that the Internet, virtual reality, and digital art are culturally significant less as technological novelties and more for the ways in which they refashion and remix existing forms of visual representation. They write, "what is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media" (15).

[3] I draw instead upon the common social usage of the term 'remedial' to refer to the process or act of re-educating a deficient or under-educated student.

Billed as "the definitive spy-ware performance," *Point Blank* features a young woman's systematic search for the meaning of life through the high-power zoom lens of her camera. The show begins with nineteen-year-old Nada, her name a satisfying synonym for blankness, explaining her personal research project to her audience – a group I was fortunate to be among one evening in November 2008 at PS122 in New York. Speaking with a laid-back, scientific detachment, Nada told us that she had spent the last few years traveling through a range of European and American cities, taking surreptitious photographs of intimate, everyday moments from strangers' lives. She used a 200x zoom lens in order to catch details of everyday life surreptitiously, without the awareness of her gaze influencing the candid 'reality' of her subjects' behavior. Nada emphasized the candid nature of the photographs as a sign of their truth, framing them as evidence of "what you really look like when you think no one is watching."

That evening, she was going to share with us her sprawling database of spy photographs – numbering over 75,000 and growing daily – that she was now attempting to organize and interpret. Over the next 90 minutes, she said, she needed our help to analyze the contents of these photographs in order to deduce the secret of a life worth living, and help her avoid the chaos of an un-examined life governed by chance. Before we knew it, my fellow audience members and I found ourselves working as impromptu surveillance analysts, reading and interpreting selected photographs that depicted a wide range of human lifestyles, emotions, and situations, that Nada might want to emulate or avoid. At Nada's prompting, we attempted to autopsy the images and organize them according to qualities of life, such as 'happiness' 'loneliness,' and, most terrifyingly, 'blankness,' laboring to read universal truths that the surreptitious photographs supposedly held.

It quickly became apparent that Nada was not alone in behaving as though the photographs were containers of raw data that could yield some kind of answer. While some audiences hesitated before answering Nada's question about which snapshot portrayed someone we "should trust," we all chuckled with uneasy recognition when we agreed as a group that we wouldn't get in a car with the pale guy with tinted sunglasses and a moustache. In another instance, a palpable shudder went through the entire audience as a series of candid photographs showed a couple locked in a tear-ridden shouting match.

The ease and familiarity with which my fellow audience members and I joined Nada in analyzing her candid photographs raises important questions about where our cultural knowledge about surveillance photography, theatricality, discipline, and evidence comes from. If we had not been gathered together in a theatre, would we have been so willing to play along with Nada and take her project seriously? What if the pictures had been staged, posed, faked – which they very well could have been; would we think that our examination of them could garner any 'real' information? Clearly I was not the only one pondering the second of these questions that night; an older man seated in front of me asked Nada at one point if she had set up a certain couple to pose in a particularly goofy way on a park bench. The room went silent for a moment, until Nada smiled and shrugged, dodging his question with her characteristic non-chalance: "Hey, this zoom lens is not a fake." We all erupted in the most nervous laughter of the night.

By shifting the focus back onto the technology of capture, Nada avoided the deeper question that was at the heart of *Point Blank*, the question that made us all titter and shift uncomfortably for a moment in our seats. Nada's surreptitious photographs referenced socio-political models of knowledge, fact, and 'truth,' and yet their status as 'props' within the theatre production resonated with debates over 'truth' and 'falsity' that have long

haunted practices of theatrical representation. In essence, Kaldor's set up of *Point Blank* re-animated cultural histories from the last century that have produced theatricality and evidence as oppositional terms – historical discourses that set up theatricality as a measure of self-consciousness and falsity in order to construct surreptitious or candid photography as markers of stable evidence and 'truth.'

Indeed, early rhetoric surrounding photography and surveillance labored to posit candid or surreptitious photographs as indexes of stable evidence and the 'real.' The marketing of hand-held and spy cameras, which reached a fever pitch by the turn of the 20th century, created and fueled a powerful desire in consumers to capture candid moments in social life as they occurred outside of the prepared social pose. Capturing a candid moment with a camera came to stand as a modernist conception of 'the real;' the more unconscious the moment captured, the more real it was. August Sander, a New Objectivist and co-founder of Britain's Mass Observation movement, espoused the belief that the candid photograph "would 'fix and hold fast history' and 'express the whole brutal inhuman spirit of the time in universally comprehensible form.'"[4]

In contrast to the candid photograph, the posed portrait came to be seen as contrived, self-conscious, and theatrical; awareness of a camera's gaze was thought to

---

[4] Quoted in Frizzell, 11. August Sander was a co-founder of the Mass Observation Movement in the mid-1930's in Britain. Profoundly influenced by New Objectivity, the movement embodied a utopian, anti-disciplinary moment in the history of surveillance photography. The founders of the movement aimed to conduct an anthropology of their own society, believing that through the exact documentation of life as it was really lived in England at that time, they could counter balance the presentational, social veneer of late Victorian England. Humphrey Spender, a photographer in the Mass Observation Movement, wanted to use his camera to capture life outside the pose and to publish his findings in such a way as to reveal to the population truths about themselves. He spent time in working class neighborhoods, becoming not only trusted and familiar, but "invisible," which was his self proclaimed key to success in capturing 'real' moments (Frizzell, 18). In other words, it was through the concealment of the camera-eye that he felt he could be most successful in the project of Mass Observation.

interpellate the subject of the photograph into artificial social poses that stood in for who

the he or she 'really' was. Consciously constructed poses, a foundational aspect of

theatricality,[5] were thus set against surreptitious or candid photographs in the cultural

imaginary of the early 20th century. 'Posing' on stage or camera was seen as disingenuous,

fabricated, and un-objective, whereas the candid photograph came to stand as stable

evidence. Surreptitious photography (and its offshoot, spy photography and surveillance)

was thus positively aligned with stable, irrefutable evidence through an explicit disavowal of

the truth-value of consciously constructed (theatrical), posed photographs. Moreover, even

though objects and bodies in theatre and live performance function in material and indexical

registers in a similar way as surveillance data, practices of theatrical representation came to

be seen as unstable, shifting too easily between and beyond the materiality they appear to be

and the sign to which they refer.[6]

These historical processes, in which the stability of photographic evidence was

constructed against the artificiality of theatricality, loomed large within the theatrical frame

of *Point Blank*. As an audience member, I was caught in a curiously indistinct balance

between belief and doubt, security and crisis of faith. I was unsure whether or not Nada's

---

[5] See Criag Owens "Posing" in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (1992). See also Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography" (1931) in *One Way Street* (1979).

[6] This slipperiness, or 'failure of relation,' as Nicholas Ridout puts it, that is central to theatrical representation has fueled historical debates and disputes over the reliability of facts or evidence presented within a theatrical context, driving anti-theatrical polemics as well as staunch defenses of live performance. For some avant-garde theorists and practitioners, such as Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, this distance from the 'real' is an integral part of the efficacy and artistry of theatre, allowing for critical reflections on the 'real' through theatrical representation. Anti-theatrical perspectives, offered by theorists as diverse as Plato and Michael Fried, have criticized theatrical representation as a process of copying, or doubling that blurs and debases an object's ideal, or 'real' status once it is incorporated in a theatrical frame. Contemporary performance theorists such as Richard Schechner, Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, Joseph Roach, Janelle Reinelt, and Nicholas Ridout have celebrated live performance and theatricality precisely for its capacity to problematize stable conceptions of the 'real.'

vast store of photographs, seemingly candid and taken without the subject's knowledge, were indeed 'real' surreptitious photos or if some or all of them had been 'faked.' They certainly read as spy photographs, shot from high angles, obscured by curtains and branches, and catching passersby in awkwardly intimate poses, but was this a rhetorical strategy of Kaldor's? And how much did it matter, anyway? Did I really want to break the spell of the theatre, under which my fellow audience members were sharing an overarching sense of empathy with the questions that Nada was asking, and a deep yearning to avoid the sadness or experience the joy that was palpably present in the photographs she showed?

In the end, I am glad that the question of the photographs' 'truth' was left unanswered. Regardless of whether the scenes in the photographs had been staged as candid or really were 'un-posed,' the subtle indistinction between truth and falsity gave the piece its political edge. By engaging the murky intertwining of the 'real' and the representational, truth and falsity historically associated with theatricality, Kaldor cast the photographic surveillance data into similar shadows of doubt and indeterminancy. In effect, Kaldor was firing blanks – fake theatrical bullets – at the construct of surreptitious photographic evidence and the stability of 'truth' itself. In partnership with the (arguably) fictional Nada, Kaldor subtly remediated the conceit of surreptitious photography, submitting the evidentiary claim of candid snapshots to the slipperiness and doubt of theatrical representation.