

Cultural Dimensions of Human Security: Surveillance, Self, and Ecology in Contemporary Visual Culture

Mark A. Cheetham
University of Toronto

Whether personal, social, or broadly political, the definition and preservation of HS is central to contemporary visual practice around the world. Artists do much more than respond to or reflect contemporary anxieties: they explore issues that other parts of society may not recognize and they offer novel solutions to perceived problems. The research thread that I am proposing will follow two critical aspects of this investigation: first, the surveillance of the individual and her/his identification as part of a group, and secondly, ecological dread. I plan to position a focused exhibition of these issues in the work of two prominent international artists – David Rokeby (Toronto) and Olafur Eliasson (Berlin) – within a larger examination of human security in visual culture today.

Calls for human security are often initiated by immediate insecurities. When we think of the visual surveillance that is increasingly a part of Western societies, a potent irony emerges. Corporate scanning of the public at ATMs, for example, in part responds to our fears. We are being protected by those who watch. Yet this watching is incrementally productive of its own anxieties. Who uses and analyzes this visual data? Because computers now programmed to sift information, we must ask by whom and with what parameters? Toronto artist David Rokeby has achieved high international profile and acclaim as a leader in interactive visual technologies. Many of his past and current projects address issues of human security via the processes of visual surveillance and the organization of information. For example, in his own words, “In *Watch* (1995), public sections of the exhibition gallery or of exterior public space, separate from my installation, are watched by surveillance cameras. These images are processed in real-time and projected onto the wall of the installation space. The video processes both present distortions of the perception of time. In one, the only things visible are things that are standing still. The effect is that of long-exposure photography, except that the image is truly live, changing subtly at every video frame. People that are moving are blurs or fogs across the image. People that are still are seen clearly. The second process is the conceptual inverse of the first. People are only visible if they are in motion. They float as outlines of themselves in a dimensionless black void, and disappear again as soon as they are still.”

The Danish/Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson (now working in Berlin) also constructs situations in which the processes of vision and perception are critically revealed. His overarching concern is our contemporary relationship with what we take to be “nature.” He focuses on how the science of perception works in a social context. In *Green Waterfall* (1998) and related works, he shocked the public by (harmlessly) tinting waterways green, arousing not only our fears of pollution but also the sometimes ineffective institutional mechanisms through which we might channel our outrage at such apparent disregard for the environment. In the *Weather Project*, seen record crowds in London in 2002, he not only recreated the effects of the winter sun indoors but also engaged public opinion on climate issues throughout the city. His work reveals assumptions, obsessions, and fears about our human security. He assuages our worries by

recreating natural effects, yet we cannot escape the knowledge that his creations are temporary and purposefully artificial.

Bringing one work by each artist together for what would, I believe, be the first time would focus attention on a large number of inter-related HS concerns and demonstrate memorably how the visual is imbricated in these fears and their alleviation. New work could be commissioned (though time is short) or extant pieces could be installed in the Berlin space. I would write a full-length essay situating Eliasson's and Rokeby's contributions within the contexts of recent explorations of HS within visual culture.