

# DECAD

Rose Butler

## *Investigatory Power*

Curated by Mareike Spendel

2 November 2019 – 4 January 2020



*Investigatory Power* is an exhibition by British artist Rose Butler bringing together the artist's own photographic work captured in the UK Houses of Parliament with video footage and imagery selected from the Stasi Records Agency film and video archive. As part of her doctoral study, which centres on surveillance, Butler considers the ethics and politics of 'looking' through arts practice. The methods, technologies and techniques of the Stasi – to date the only intelligence agency whose activities have been made publically accessible – are held as a mirror to new UK surveillance legislation. The Investigatory Powers Act (2016), aka 'The Snoopers Charter', significantly extends the UK state agencies' digital surveillance capabilities. The presentation of her research coincides this autumn with the commemoration of the 30-year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany which marked the end of the Cold War, and the (latest) Brexit deadline (the withdrawal of the UK from the EU).

The first work in the exhibition is the large photographic panorama *Chausseestrasse* (2014). Butler took the picture whilst experimenting with a Gigapan – a device developed by NASA and Google that automates the movement of the camera on the tripod in order to take a succession of images which are then joined up seamlessly into one extremely high resolution image. This file contains enough visual data to be enlarged to up to a nine-metre width. In the foreground a small path meanders between a rusty-red barrier and flowering weeds and bushes. On the right hand side, behind the barrier, we see cranes and lighting rise up in front of a large building site.

What Butler captured in her photograph is a moment of transition: the wasteland on the left belongs to what is left of the former death strip, the border area that once separated East and West Germany, a patrolled hard border with a wall, watchtowers, razor wire and the

order to shoot anyone who tried to cross it. The construction site on the right belongs to the new Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) headquarters, Germany's foreign intelligence agency, which was founded in Pullach in Bavaria in 1956. Now acting as the foreign intelligence agency of the reunited Germany, the BND in February 2019 is today the world's largest intelligence headquarters. Butler's photograph is a testimony to the decommissioning and re-commissioning of state surveillance and speaks of the collapse of one state power and the takeover of another.

On the wall opposite the panorama are presented two photographic prints selected from the Stasi archive and reproduced from 35mm negative strips. The pictures were taken with hidden cameras – probably within a briefcase. In the colour print on the right we see a young man making a phone call in a public phone booth. He was later captured sitting on the grass reading a book possibly whilst waiting for someone. The pictures were demonstrably taken in the context of the Stasi's observation of the political opposition. It is possible that he might have been a member of the Peace or Environmental Movement or another oppositional group. The young man's face has been anonymised by the Stasi Records Agency who have pixelated the digitized copy in accordance with the Stasi Records Act (1991). This legislation forms the legal basis for the work of the agency and protects the right to privacy of citizens and public figures who had been under surveillance by the Stasi. The anonymisation allows the presentation of material which was captured and recorded without the knowledge and consent of the people seen in the pictures and videos.

The black-and-white pictures on the left were taken during the opening ceremony of the newly built residential estate Ernst-Thälmann-Park in Berlin, which Mikhail Gorbachev attended as part of his first official state visit to the GRD in April 1986. The print renders visible the attempted sabotage of the film through cuts to the negative strips. The Stasi started destroying files, tapes and films in the autumn of 1989. Shortly after the fall of the wall and the stepping down of the SED, citizens became alert to the fact that the Stasi might try to cover up its extensive invasion of privacy as well as other illegal actions, which instigated the takeover of Stasi buildings all over East Germany by civil rights groups during the Peaceful Revolution and finally the foundation of the Stasi Records Agency in 1991. Part of the agency's work is a mission to reassemble and analyse the material that has been sabotaged or shredded.

Selected video materials from the Stasi Records Agency's archive include the artist's three-hour video edit of a surveillance operation covering a public protest on Berlin's Alexanderplatz on the 7th of September 1989, held in opposition to the rigged election results (May 1989). Stasi agents had covered the protest with at least six different cameras, which Butler 'reverse edited'. She re-mapped the time code of the cameras back to real time by replacing sections where the camera had been paused with black gaps. She then synchronised all six cameras so as to reconstruct a panoptical view of the order of events that afternoon. In the midst of the gathering protesters the Stasi recorded a civilian courageously shouting "people who are free, don't need to flee" into a camera that he believed belonged to a Western camera crew, before being arrested and taken away. Another earlier black-and-white film from the 1970s shows Stasi informants in Rotall near

Rosslau in Saxony-Anhalt – a prohibited zone – practicing the use of 16mm cameras hidden in briefcases. The film was most likely produced for internal training purposes. Shot in parts from a window overlooking the park, the film also contains scenes shot on the ground from the low angle of the briefcases and from higher up within hidden nesting boxes. The different camera angles symbolise what was the reality for many people working for the Stasi: while watching others, they were themselves always under surveillance. The film is furthermore interrupted with a completely unrelated and rather mundane scene showing a man sitting in a crowded street tending to his child. Due to the scarcity of resources in the GDR, films and tapes were often recorded over and reused. Thus the imagery switches between training material to actual surveillance footage as the tape is put into another camera, or cuts and edits take place in camera to save film. Within this footage we also see creative learning through japing about, posing for the camera, filming what's to hand as well as cameraderie among colleagues – all under the auspices of the SED dictatorship during which creative freedoms were increasingly censored and under which certain artist collectives were systematically subverted and broken up.

The three large serial photographic prints in the centre of the exhibition – one black-and-white the other two in colour – are the results of Butler's experiments with a 1960s Minox miniature camera, once a popular device for espionage used on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The pictures appear in the print in chronological order as they were taken and developed from the film. They include first tests of the camera at home, several badly exposed, 'empty' pictures, as well as pictures taken – covertly – inside the Houses of Parliament, where Butler witnessed the debates that preceded the passing of the Investigatory Powers Act for eight months in 2016. This act of law forms the legal basis for digital surveillance in the UK, today the most widely surveilled democratic state in the western world.

In 2013 former American intelligence contractor Edward Snowden leaked documents to journalists that proved the existence and use of government-sponsored mass surveillance programme Tempora by the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) to systematically gain access to, collect and use large amounts of Internet users' personal data. Thus, the UK was revealed to violate its obligations relating to the protection of individuals with regard the processing of personal data according to both UK national and EU law. Ever since Snowden's revelations, various human rights and civil liberties groups have been challenging European governments in court over the unrestricted collection and use of information. In April 2018 the UK High Court ruled in favour of Liberty that the Investigatory Powers Act violates EU law. In a similar court case in Germany in 2017, the Federal Administrative Court in Leipzig ruled in favour of Reporters without Borders against the mass storage of data by the BND.

Surveillance, as Butler points out, is the blind spot in a democracy. The files, images and data amassed as a result of contemporary state surveillance are missing from the exhibition. The access to comparable material of a fallen state power allows the artist to make this gap visible. Of course there undeniably exists a qualitative difference between film, magnetic tape and ethereal data; between photographic grain, video static and digital pixels and most of what has been documented looks and sounds banal. But what Butler's experimental

demonstrates is where the fundamental danger posed by surveillance lies. The state-backed security promise through surveillance inevitably leads to a threat to democracy: the impossibility of making the means and methods of surveillance transparent and controlled by civil society perpetuates the existing power structures that it actively hides. Post Brexit, as the UK Government becomes more and more authoritarian in its approach to parliament, the exhibition begins to expose the threat of surveillance – hidden under the guise of security – to democratic freedoms.

With special thanks to Simone Külow from the BStU.

Artist bio :

Rose Butler is an artist, researcher and senior lecturer of Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. She uses adapted technology and custom built software alongside early cameras and analogue technique to make interactive installations, single and multi-screen videos or large-scale photographs. By bringing together photographic and filmic documentation, archival material, political commentary and fiction in her research, she examines the narratives that surround and shape us.

Her research was presented at the *Surveillance Beyond Borders and Boundaries Conference*, Aarhus, June 2018; *NAFAE Living Research: The Urgency of the Arts*, Royal College of Art, March 2019; *Free and Open Source Technologies, Arts and Commoning Practices*, University of Nicosia Research Foundation, Cyprus, May 2019; *Uncertainty, Turbulence and Moving Image Archives*, University College London, June 2019 and *Creative Interruptions: A Festival of Arts and Activism*, British Film Institute, June 2019.

Her work will be exhibited at Decad, Berlin, November 2019 followed by NeMe, Cyprus, October 2020. Her interactive installation *Come & Go* was exhibited at the Millenium Galleries in Sheffield, 2017 and received an award as part of the Surveillance Studies Art Prize 2018.

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