The fall of the Berlin wall (November 1989) heralded an era of change. Three months after the media broadcasted to the world images of Berliners climbing over and hammering the Wall, the international community witnessed the release of Nelson Mandela (February 1990).

*Conspiracy Dwellings*, with its focus on surveillance in contemporary art, provides one of those rare opportunities to show how people from countries so far apart geographically not only shared a similar history of oppression, they also demonstrated the same resilience and determination to achieve their freedom and a recognition of their human rights.

**THE LIVES OF OTHERS:**
**ARTUR ZMIJEWSKI’S *REPETITION,*
THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT,
AND THE ETHICS OF SURVEILLANCE**

**ANTHONY DOWNEY**

I like it when art is no longer art, when it stops being art.
—Artur Zmijewski

In 2005, under the direction of the Polish artist Artur Zmijewski, a “prison” was constructed in Warsaw’s historical district of Praga. For a planned period of two weeks, and following on from a screening process, seventeen unemployed Polish men were allocated the role of being either a guard or a prisoner in this makeshift prison. The building, now part of the Van Abbemuseum’s collection in Holland, had one-way windows through which five cameramen gathered material that was further complemented with footage from an infra-red surveillance camera. Over the ensuing days, and under constant surveillance, an undulying game of cat and mouse was played out by the inmates and guards alike; a scenario in which control, subversion, manipulation and, ultimately, gratuitous humiliation became the order of the day. This uncompromising and at times disconcerting footage was used to produce *Repetition* (2005), a film that has since acquired much by way of reputation and critical plaudits. The origins of *Repetition*, both in its concept and objectives, not to mention its *mise en scène*, lie in events that occurred almost thirty-five years earlier under the supervision of the American psychologist Philip Zimbardo. Following on from a series of interviews and a period of psychological assessment, a sample group of twenty-four college students—garned from replies to a Californian newspaper advertisement placed in the summer of 1971—were randomly allocated, after the flip of a coin, the

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1 The Van Abbemuseum acquired the prison constructed of chipboard and the filmed footage for the occasion of their exhibition of Artur Zmijewski’s show there in 2007. It was shown alongside a quadriptych of films made by the artist in Israel.
role of either prisoner or prison guard in a research project that came to be known, somewhat infamously, as the Stanford Prison Experiment. To the extent that the project has since been criticised as unethical, in later years by Zimbardo himself, and questioned on the basis of its usefulness in terms of research, the Stanford Prison Experiment nevertheless had an explicit if not intriguing question underwriting it: how do seemingly “normal” people react to having roles (and authority) imposed upon them? After six days, in which he noted that his volunteers had internalised their parts so completely that his prisoners had become traumatised and his guards increasingly sadistic, Zimbardo called a halt to the experiment. The internalisation of roles was so consummate, he noted, that a significant number of participants were finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish their role-play from the reality of the situation, himself included.

Prior to the cessation of the experiment, however, it was observed that the guards were becoming increasingly ruthless and severe during the day and at night, when they thought the cameras were off, they were subjecting their charges to ever more brutal treatment. This brings us to an often overlooked aspect of the Stanford Prison Experiment: what role did the deployment of surveillance (or the apparent suspension of its use) have in producing the behaviour of inmates and guards alike? Despite the fact that both experiments ended with a similar degree of exasperation and concern for the psychological and physical well-being of its participants, to date discussions of Zimbrowski’s subsequent re-enactment of the Stanford Prison Experiment have failed to fully address either the artist’s role in the film as a figure of ultimate authority and power—not unlike that adopted and wielded by Zimbardo—nor his use of surveillance, not least the manner in which it renders viewers complicit in the events portrayed in the film.

I should note from the outset, however, that Arthur Zimbrowski’s oeuvre to date is extensive and invariably challenging. To extrapolate from one work and take it to be indicative of his work in general is not my goal here. Nor am I suggesting that art should not challenge ethical, political and aesthetic pieties. It is precisely the contradictions inherent within and the irreducible ambiguities that underwrite contemporary art today that gives it both an autonomous and yet integrated role to play in the politics and ethics of our time. And those contradictions are nowhere more clearly visible than in collaborative art practices that employ the visual rhetoric of surveillance. However, the relatively underdeveloped discussion of both Zimbrowski’s role and his use of surveillance in Repetition brings to the fore the often problematic relationship between ethics and aesthetics and engages a singular question: can the use of surveillance be anything other than a compromised form of film-making that—in its deployment of a complicit visual rhetoric and objectifying practices—situates the viewer in an anterior position of power within a hierarchy of panopticonised observation?

Experimental Psychology and the Architecture of Debasement

It may seem somewhat quaint today as we look back through the prism of wrongful arrests and miscarriages of justice worldwide, but Zimbardo was originally aided by the Palo Alto police force who, on a quiet Sunday morning in August 1971, obligingly arrested and conducted full booking procedures on the volunteers deemed prisoners in the Stanford Prison Experiment.2 Arrested at their places of work and private homes, these individuals were fingerprinted, had mug-shots taken and, upon arrival at the prison, were de-loused and assigned a cell. The prison in question was constructed by boarding up each end of a corridor in the basement of the psychology department at Stanford University, with the ensuing enclosed space ironically referred to as “The Yard.” This was the only place where prisoners were allowed to walk, eat, fraternise, or exercise. In order to go to the toilet inmates were first blindfolded so they could not observe the way out of the prison. Nor were any clocks or windows visible in this edifice, an intentional absence that further promoted a sense of alienation and displacement—precisely the conditions that Zimbardo wanted to induce in his charges from the outset.

A central factor in this process of disorientation and alienation, and the subsequent debasement and degradation visited upon these prisoners, was the carceral architecture of control that dominated the experiment and the power that surveillance invests in the observer. Apart from a hidden camera at one end of “The Yard,” an intercom system was set up to allow aural surveillance of the prisoners and to make public announcements. It was through such mechanisms that the guards were able to not only observe the detainees but listen in on their conversations. It should be also noted that the abuse meted out to the prisoners, as was later acknowledged, was largely due to the lack of any clear guidelines from Zimbardo as to how detainees should be treated; nor were the guards given any training in

2 At a later stage in the experiment, Zimbardo was to rue the fact that the police force, due to considerations of liability and insurance, refused to give over the police station for the continued incarceration of his wards. For full, and surprisingly frank, details of the prelude to the experiment and events throughout, see http://www.prisonexp.org/ (accessed December 10, 2009).
policing an institution whose primary function was incarceration. In the experiment, Zimbardo, who played the proactive role of the "superintendent" whilst also being the apparently objective psychological researcher, gave instructions to the guards that were to later become controversial:

You can create in the prisoners feelings of boredom, a sense of fear to some degree, you can create a notion of arbitrariness that their life is totally controlled by us, by the system, you, me, and they'll have no privacy... We're going to take away their individuality in various ways. In general what all this leads to is a sense of powerlessness. That is, in this situation we'll have all the power and they'll have none.3

The situation, needless to say, quickly got out of hand, with prisoners forced to sleep on the ground (their mattresses having been confiscated); threats of further violence being used to quell dissent (including the discharge of carbon-dioxide from a fire extinguisher); the deployment of arbitrary forms of punishment (including press-ups, stress-positions, and solitary confinement); prisoners being forced to go naked, subjected to sexual humiliation, and forced to perform acts of simulated homosexual sex; and, finally, so-called slop buckets being left un-emptied so that the smell of urine and faeces pervaded the cells and further dehumanised those imprisoned within, guard and prisoner alike.4

4 There have been comparisons made here with similar techniques to those used in Abu Ghraib, not least by Zimbardo who recently appeared as an expert witness at the Abu Ghraib court martial proceedings brought against Ivan "Chip" Frederick—the latter being a staff sergeant who was to become the highest-ranking officer court-martialled for crimes at the American-run prison. To the extent that Zimbardo is right in suggesting that the conditions prevalent within Abu Ghraib for prisoner and inmate alike—if taken into account alongside the stresses associated with being in a theatre of war—were so dehumanising to begin with that such abuses were inevitable, his thesis carries a not insignificant degree of purchase. What is more, the absence of any Standard Operating Procedure (S.O.P.) at Abu Ghraib—an absence that exploited the lack of clear-cut procedures in the prison alongside the strategically ambiguous orders handed down from the executive branch of the American government—does indeed find parallel in Zimbardo's vague instructions to the guards in his 1971 experiment. It has been argued, for example, that it is was precisely the absence of any S.O.P., not to mention the Bush Government's intentional obfuscation of its responsibilities under the Geneva Convention, that was responsible for the institutionalised, as opposed to individualised, forms of abuse and torture that were inflicted upon inmates at Abu Ghraib. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, Standard Operating Procedure: A War Story (London: Picador, 2008) and Philippe Sands,

Plate 5.1. Artur Zmijewski, Repetition, 2005. Film still, single channel video projection or monitor, 74.15 min. Courtesy of the artist, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.

The Stanford experiment ended on August 20, 1971 and it has been since argued (and refuted) that the experiment amply demonstrated the potential for any individual, regardless of background, to resort to unquestioning obedience within the context of legitimising ideologies that adopt (and adapt) institutional forms. The experiment is also consistently cited to illustrate cognitive dissonance theory; that is to say, the implication that it is situations and contexts that produce an individual's behaviour rather than an individual's personality. However, on ethical grounds, the original Stanford Prison Experiment would be not only

films and the very means by which Zmięjski controls events within the prison?

In light of his role as prison guard/observer/artist/producer, it is often a source of surprise that Zmięjski has been critically viewed as an objective and ultimately disinterested observer. D.C. Murray suggests that "[i]n many instances, Zmięjski purposefully inhabits the role of a disengaged observer, allowing events to unfold without intervention." This is patently untrue: if anything Zmięjski is the agent provocateur and very quickly allows his influence to be felt upon the protagonists in the film. He is a deus ex machina of sorts, but rather than resolve conflict he seems to actively encourage it. There are a number of times where he interjects forcibly, like a producer impatient for conflict to arise, in order to speed up the action or create circumstances where discord will thrive. In one particular scene, following a show of insubordination from "prisoner 810" on day four, Zmięjski Cajoles the guard in question and notes that the prisoner must be punished. "Prisoner 810" is taken from his cell, on Zmięjski's initiative, and coerced into apologising to his fellow inmates before being further humiliated and transferred to a solitary confinement cell. Mise en scène, in such fabricated surroundings, can quickly become a form of mise en abyme: individuals are placed into an infinity or an abyss of confusion between role-playing and reality. The architecture of debasement, in which surveillance upholds carceral systems of abuse,

Plate 5.2. Artur Zmięjski, Repetition. 2005. Film still, single channel video projection or monitor, 74.15 min. Courtesy of the artist, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.

There is in this statement something that, at best, could be read as disingenuous or, at worst, insidious. The mere allusion to research being performed in this film, and thus producing a form of knowledge that can be in part substantiated or reliably referred to, is compromised from the outset not only by payment to individuals but by the very fact that Zmięjski has chosen an indelibly flawed experiment to re-enact in the first place. From the outset we must enquire into what exactly lies behind the ambition of this film and how we interpret it: is it to explore, through the very act of repetition, the ethics of the first failed experiment? And if so, why exactly? As a form of knowledge, in this instant psychological, it neither confirms nor refutes an already compromised hypothesis. Is Zmięjski's film about free will and our apparent lack of it in the face of an ideological system of rules? And what role, crucially, does surveillance play here; that is, the very means by which we access the

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8 Derek Conrad Murray, "Carceral Subjects: the Play of Power in Artur Zmięjski's Repetition / Sujets Carcéraux: le Jeu du Pouvoir dans Repetition d'Artur Zmięjski," Parachute, no. 124, Montreal, Canada, 2006, 78-91 (78). In a relatively lengthy exploration of Zmięjski's work, Norman L. Kleebblatt also argues, following on from vague references to the "profound beauty" and "uncanny beauty" to be had in Zmięjski's œuvre, that the artist "offers nothing but dispassionate observation." Again, this is simply not the case, nowhere more so than in Repetition, a film which Kleebblatt, despite detailing the majority of Zmięjski's work to date, does not mention nor explore. Nor does he mention 80064, 2004, a film in which Zmięjski cajoled a 92 year survivor of Auschwitz, one Józef Tarnawa, to have his concentration camp number, the eponymous title of the film, re-tattooed on his arm. Despite these and other instances in which Zmięjski plays an obvious if not decisive role in his films, he still has the name of being objective, a bystander in what is unfolding around him as opposed to a protagonist. See Norman L. Kleebblatt, "Moral Hazard," in Artforum, April 2009, 155-161 (159). I have written about Zmięjski's 80064 in a different context elsewhere. See Anthony Downey "Zones of Indistinction: Giorgio Agamben's 'Bare Life' and the Politics of Aesthetics," in Third Text, vol. 23, no. 97, 2009, 109-125.
Plate 5.3. Artur Zmijewski, *Repetition*, 2005. Film still, single channel video projection or monitor, 74.15 min. Courtesy of the artist, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.

even encourage precisely such recursive levels of ethical relativism and a concomitant absence of accountability.

On day six, at 8.30 a.m., Zmijewski appointed a new warden to oversee the prison, complete with instructions that included forcing the inmates to have their heads shaved. On day seven, following on from the rancour involved in this enforced head shaving, the warden in question has a crisis of confidence and refers to Zmijewski who abnegates his authority over the matter, despite having introduced the very practices that have produced the crisis in the first place. The experiment/film comes to a close with the guards and prisoners alike agreeing that the boundaries of decent and humane behaviour have been overstepped. They subsequently vote unanimously to end the “experiment.” It is a somewhat cathartic ending to a compromised idea and it is all the more suspect, following on from the end of the experiment and interviews with the warden, that Zmijewski should pose questions such as “[i]f it is automatically the case that if you give someone absolute power over another, he will become a monster?”

We may ask, who exactly is he referring to here, himself or the warden? He is, at the very least and despite his careful tending of the artifice surrounding his apparent objectivity, partly responsible for what has unfolded: a fact that is made evident when, upon Zmijewski suggesting to the warden that he was a good person who turned out to be bad in the circumstances, the latter replies “[I]t may be that two bad people met, you [Zmijewski] and I, and we brought it off together. You devised, I did.”

Upon being asked in an interview why he still played the role of a “truant” and from what he was avoiding in this act of truancy, Zmijewski replied that he was attempting to be truant from “ethical, aesthetical or religious obligations—from all duty.” Of course, such a statement has to be understood in a specific context; however, it still begs a fundamental question: can we apply ethical criticism to *Repetition* in the same way that many commentators, Zimbardo included, have applied it to the original experiment upon which it is based? If we consider the role of ethics in this film and its making we nevertheless come up against a conundrum of sorts. In a milieu where participative and collaborative practices have become an increasingly notable element in contemporary art, there is the suggestion that ethical-political criticism has usurped forms of criticism that take the aesthetic as their starting point. Works such as Zmijewski’s *Repetition* are thereafter judged by the quality and ethics of the collaborative practices that they set in motion rather than what makes them interesting as art. There is much to be said on this matter, including a debate on artistic autonomy, social intervention, and social praxis; however, I want to note how Zmijewski’s film could be critiqued in terms of its ethical dimension rather than its aesthetics—the latter being that which gives it purchase as art as opposed to ethical-political criticism.

We may equally ask here, in light of such observations, why art as a practice should be subjected to the criteria of objectivity or disinterestedness—is this not precisely what the aesthetic works against, so to speak: the introduction of ambiguity and contradiction into systems of apparently closed thought? To prescribe the aesthetic to a series of ethical and political considerations is to engage it in either a form of agitprop and propaganda or forms of instrumentalist rationalism—and the pitfalls of such an approach do not need to be necessarily rehearsed here. 

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9 “A Storehouse of Limbs: Artur Zmijewski speaks with Katarzyna Bielas and Dorota Jarecka,” in *Artur Zmijewski: If It Happened Only Once It’s as if It Never Happened* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 81.

10 I have written at length on the issues underwriting the relationship between aesthetic, ethics and politics in respect of so-called collaborative art practices. See
At this stage we may have to put to one side both ethical and even political categories—not to mention accusations of coercion and manipulation—and examine the work in purely aesthetic terms: what, in short, is the effect of its framing devices and formal characteristics and how do such devices relate to broader socio-political issues, not least those surrounding surveillance technologies.\textsuperscript{11}

The cells in Zmijewski's prison all employed one-way mirrored glass through which four manned and nine fixed cameras recorded all events. Putting to one side, for now, the constant effect of surveillance upon the prisoners and how it produces modes of behaviour, it is all the more pertinent to note that surveillance has its own formal aesthetic: surreptitious shots taken from above, acute angles, often grainy footage, a degree of apparent objectivity, and multiple screens. As an aesthetic form, moreover, it implicates the viewer from the outset in its panoptised rhetoric and the implication of guilt that it places (rightly or wrongly) on those who are being viewed. We, in short, become complicit in the act of surveying and surveillance. The extent to which we can ignore the ethical quandaries that arise in works such as Repetition is therefore debatable, nowhere more so than when it is precisely an aesthetics of surveillance that, in drawing us into a form of collusion if not outright connivance in the events that unfold before us, is being utilised for what are arguably dubious ends. Surveillance as a technology of seeing and imagining the world presupposes modalities of guilt in the individuals being observed and therefore encourages, for whatever reasons, a call to judgement in those observing. It promotes a vital lack of transparency, paradoxically, in the very moment of apparently revealing the world to the privileged viewer. The rhetoric and aesthetic of surveillance is not only about a will to truth, the production of truth/knowledge, it also implicates the observer within a system of knowledge that includes the production of criminological, juridical and sociological models for the study of normative and, crucially, aberrant forms of behaviour. Apart from the discursive production of subjects inherent within such knowledge systems, we need to address how the use of surveillance produces, through a process of internalisation, the very behaviour we witness. That Zmijewski's participants know that there are cameras present, and that they are the objects of observation rather than the subjects of communication, is evident throughout the film. "Prisoner 433," who withdraws from the experiment on day five, flicks his middle finger at the one-way glass before his departure and hangs his towel up to block the view of the camera. The gesture is significant insofar as it positions, in one of the few instances in the film when we are denied access to the prison, the viewer as voyeur. We are made conscious of the artifice and the way in which we have been positioned in this film as a guard by proxy. In the rhetoric of surveillance the viewer can be only ever implicated in the process of objectivising the subject who is being observed. We can only, in short, internalise the role of observer with all the ramifications that such a role implies in the context of the architecture associated with incarceration and control.\textsuperscript{12}

We, the viewer, engage here in a rhetoric of surveillance that offers nothing but way of a self-reflexive critique on the use of surveillance. Additionally, at no point in the film are we invited to consider the fact that we are also in part incriminated in this makeshift carceral system. Just as the edifice of a prison contains the events therein, the artifice of an objective gaze, central to the original experiment, is precisely that: an expedient device to absolve the viewer of any apparent responsibility for the events that are unfolding. The use of surveillance in Repetition also carries with it a rhetoric of truth: this is what we saw and this is how it happened. This is likewise dubious, especially if we consider (although it is largely beyond my remit here) Zmijewski's editing of the footage and the final form that the film took. Nonetheless, surveillance footage is often associated with veracity, both legal and phenomenological. In reality TV shows, it gives the illusion of access to the real, regardless of how contrived that real is in the first place. Recent commentators on surveillance have also noted a degree of correspondence between the forms that mass media assumes and surveillance technologies such as CCTV. For Thomas Mathiesen, "the greatly expanding mass media system provides the necessary belief context, the obedient, disciplined, subservient set of beliefs necessary for the surveillance systems to be

\textsuperscript{11} In focusing on the formal aesthetics of the film, I am putting to one side the narrative aesthetics and the film's apparently cathartic ending. There is much to say on the narrative aesthetics, in terms of both the conflicts and resolutions we witness and how editing generates such readings; however, for the purpose of my argument here, I am primarily interested in the formal aesthetics of surveillance and how it is utilised in Repetition.

\textsuperscript{12} This reading would run counter to Norman L. Kleblatt's suggestion that the artist's videos "seem incompatible with simulation theories of ethical aesthetics, which postulate that the viewer (or reader) internalises the situation of the protagonist, using his or her own belief system to play out the narrative of a work of literature or art." See Norman L. Kleblatt, "Moral Hazard," Artforum, April 2009, 155-161; (155).
functional.” Or, to put it another way, the “synoptic” TV viewing experience—the masses watching the few—finds a counterpart of sorts in the “panoptic” technology involved in surveillance, the latter involving the few surveying the masses. Surveillance is normalised not only through its presence and usages but through its popular cultural inflections. And to this we could likewise add its use in contemporary art practices such as those used in Artur Zmijewski’s Repetition.

Conclusion

I earlier noted that Artur Zmijewski’s work is both challenging and, in turn, a veritable challenge to any embedded or indeed cherished notion of a privileged ethical vantage point from which the artist or indeed viewer can claim the moralistic high-ground. Perhaps this is central to the leap that Zmijewski wants art to make, as expressed in the epigraph to this essay: “I like it when art is no longer art, when it stops being art.” This call for an art that integrates the aesthetic within the social order, and thus renders aesthetics responsive (but not necessarily reducible) to the social, political, economic, religious, and ethical milieu in which it is produced, disseminated and exchanged, is a noble and ultimately utopic vision of art—and to that end it should be supported. However, when art employs an aesthetic, such as that associated with surveillance, in order to render the viewer complicit in the debasement of others we have issues that must of necessity address an ethics of engagement. This is not to promote an ethics-based criticism of participative and collaborative-based practices (and the quality or otherwise of such events and collusions); rather it is to suggest an ethics of aesthetics and how such a form would address the role of the viewer in this rhetoric of surveillance and the panopticised power-play at work in a film such as Repetition.

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14 In a House of Commons report published in 2009, Lord Goodlad observed the following: “The huge rise in surveillance and data collection by the state and other organisations risks undermining the long-standing traditions of privacy and individual freedom which are vital for democracy. If the public are to trust that information about them is not being improperly used there should be much more openness about what data is collected, by whom and how it is used.” See Lord Goodlad, Surveillance: Citizens and the State, House of Lords Report, February 6, 2009.