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US Surveillance as Art

New York Art critic Ben Davis acts as our guide to Ai Wei Wei's latest exhibition, *Hansel and Gretel*, which explores Surveillance tracking visitors with drones and infrared technology.

Available now

🕒 27 minutes

Artist Faiza Ramadan and journalist Danya Hajjaji discuss how despite ongoing chaos in Libya, a new and more expressive art scene is blossoming in the country.

To mark Canada Day, we talk to poetry superstar Rupi Kaur about her new collection and how she's become more influenced by politics.

And Columbian short story writer Julianne Pachico explains how the exotic animals living in her neighbourhood have influenced and appeared in her fiction.

With Tina Daheley.

(Photo: Surveillance cameras in the US. Credit: Getty Images)

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On the June 30 episode of the BBC's The Cultural Frontline, I spoke about Ai Weiwei's "Hansel & Gretel" show at the Park Avenue Armory, which is intended as a commentary on government surveillance. I have transcribed the last part of the program:

Tina Daheley: What's the significance of Ai Weiwei being the artist behind this exhibition?

Ben Davis: It's very significant for two reasons. One, because he himself is an artist who was detained in China and has faced a great deal of surveillance himself. He ran a popular blog that was shut down; his social media presence is very much scrutinized by both fans and government observers. I think that gives it a feeling of seriousness. I think there would be maybe even more criticism of this work if it wasn't him, if it wasn't this particular figure making this statement.

It's also not just Ai Weiwei. It's Ai Weiwei working with the Swiss architects Herzog & De Meuron. That's a significant collaboration because they worked together on the Bird's Nest Stadium in Beijing for the Beijing Olympics, and it was in the lead up to those Olympics that Ai Weiwei first became a political speaker. Because he was part of those Olympics, because he had worked on that very important centerpiece project, that gave him a platform where he started talking about the lack of freedom of expression and fundamental rights in China that led him down the path to becoming more of an activist, and that led him to be eventually detained by the government.

So, it's a significant collaboration, and significant that this collaboration mobilizes those themes of surveillance, social media, and so on.

TD: Does this exhibition feel timely? Especially in light of recent terror attacks and increasing pressure on social media companies—Facebook, Google, Twitter—to do more, and to stop the spread of extremism online?

BD: This exhibition has been several years in the making. So it is timely, but it is also a part of a larger conversation that we've been having for a while. I think since WikiLeaks and the Edward Snowden leaks, [there's been] an increasing awareness of government surveillance in the United States and in the UK and around the world. It's part of a conversation that people are having politically and in pop culture. It's out there.

I personally think that, if you want to flip it around, that the more interesting contemporary conversation that is hidden in this work is about social media. People are having a great deal of fun with it. It's supposed to have this serious message: Exposing you to a sense of how you are surveilled against your will. But people are really taking part in it willingly, and post images of it on their social media.

And I think that is a very interesting thing about the contemporary conversation about surveillance, that there's unwilling surveillance, but then we also give up a lot of our data willingly when it is flattering to our own egos.

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The full program can be heard here:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p056srhn>