

# What to Watch

## A Lewis Baltz mural as a reflection on NSA surveillance

OVER THE SUMMER, in the days after the *Guardian* reported that the National Security Agency was accumulating extraordinary amounts of data on the communications of Americans, news outlets searched for a way to make tangible the abstraction that is mass digital surveillance. The *New York Times*, National Public Radio, the *Washington Post*, and plenty of others quickly seized on the Utah Data Center, a \$1.2 billion data-storage facility the NSA is building in an exurb of Salt Lake City. Operational as early as this month, the facility will be the physical place where the NSA will store much of said data about our phone calls and Web surfing.

While photographs of the new data center are dramatic, they mostly conjure up a really big Walmart, and not "the largest, most covert, and potentially most intrusive intelligence agency ever created," as writer James Bamford described it in *Wired*. For a meditation on the intrusiveness of the technologically enabled surveillance state, we should look to Lewis Baltz's rarely seen 1992–95 masterwork,

*Ronde de Nuit*. It is a photographic mural about how quickly images from CCTV cameras become data and about the ubiquity of information in general, as well as how fast it moves around the world. The mix of imagery in the work—close-up photographs of data cables link surveillance footage of buildings to spycam-derived images of people, all held together by harsh light and darkness—is confusing, scary, and even menacing.

"Baltz became interested in technology so complex in its workings that it normally isn't represented in images," explains Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) curator Matthew Witkovsky, who acquired *Ronde de Nuit* for the museum in 2010. "It was this impossible challenge that he enjoyed: The technology of surveillance delivers images but itself seems to resist imaging." *Ronde de Nuit* is Baltz's most intense exploration of that idea. The title sets the tone: *Ronde de Nuit* is also the French title of Rembrandt's famous painting *The Night Watch*. The Rembrandt shows a group of Amsterdam civic guardsmen apparently beginning their patrol of the city. (Civic guardsmen were local citizens responsible

for keeping the city under watch and performing basic security duties—such as locking the gates to the town—during the overnight hours.) While the Rembrandt bursts with civic pride, the Baltz winces at the advance of the security state.

There are numerous similarities between the two pieces: Both are enormous by the standards of their time: *The Night Watch* measures 12 by 14 feet, and was even bigger before it was cut down early in the 18th century. The edition of *Ronde de Nuit* in the AIC's collection is 39 feet long and 7 feet tall. Both take place at night (or, to put it another way: In both works the government keeps tabs on you even as you sleep). And both are effectively single compositions built up from many different images. Rembrandt's guardsmen and town residents would have posed for him separately, one after the other: Baltz built his piece from many images, both pictures he took himself—the data cables—and images taken from surveillance cameras in Roubaix, a suburb of Lille, France, which were made available to him during

effect: to create a sense of disorientation and confusion and, with that, the suggestion that maybe surveillance isn't providing surveillants with a complete or reliable story.

As best I can tell, *Ronde de Nuit* has been exhibited in the United States only three times: at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1998, and in 2010–11, in an exhibition organized by the Art Institute of Chicago that traveled to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. That's a shame. As Edward Snowden's revelations about the extent of the American and British security states continue, it's becoming clear that the massive expansion of government surveillance has rendered the practice both astonishing and intangible, an enormous abstraction. Baltz's photomural, with its seemingly paradoxical nods to history painting, the American mural tradition, and the digital transfer of information, provides a path toward an understanding of our new surveillance-state era. Sure,



the course of a commission for a French cultural center. ("The French, at that time, were very suspicious about their society degenerating into a police state," Baltz told me. "Americans, evidently, do not share those concerns.")

If basing a photographic collage about surveillance on a 350-year-old painting seems a little unusual, it's not—at least not for Baltz. Ever since the 1960s, when he was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute, Baltz's project has been to use the history of painting and his own medium, photography, to explore sociocultural issues. *Ronde de Nuit* owes plenty to American art, too, and especially to Thomas Hart Benton. One of the strengths of Benton's murals is the way he toys with the picture plane, sometimes pushing groups of men up toward the viewer, at other times letting them recede into the background. Baltz borrows that trick but uses it to his own

*Ronde de Nuit* predates the post-9/11 surveillance state by almost a decade, but in focusing on surveillance as easily transferable information, it demonstrates great understanding of what was then an emerging security-state practice.

Thinking about this work now, the fear that runs through it makes a lot more sense than when I first saw it several years ago. One of the tests of artworks is how well they last or migrate from the time in which they are made to different eras. *Ronde de Nuit* was made in a security-camera era but is somehow even more relevant in today's America. That left me wondering if Baltz was also thinking about *Ronde de Nuit* in the days after Snowden spoke to the *Guardian*. He said he wasn't. "What I thought was that Edward Snowden should receive the Medal of Freedom and a generous lifetime pension from a grateful nation," he said. "But I doubt that is how it will play out." ■

Lewis Baltz  
*Ronde de Nuit*, 1992–95.  
Collage of 12 Cibachrome prints, 7 x 39 ft