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October 2017

Making an hour-long performance that tackles global mass-surveillance head-on might be the single most difficult thing I've ever tried to do in theatre.

In 2015, as part of Proto-type Theater along with my collaborators Rachel Baynton, Gillian Lees, and visual artist, animator and designer Adam York Gregory, I started to make *A Machine they're Secretly Building*: a performance that grew from our shared feelings of outrage and disbelief at the US and UK Government's indiscriminate, and *illegal*, mass-surveillance of private citizens.

Even for people actively interested in the avalanche of documents and memos unearthed in the wake of Edward Snowden's 2013 leaks, at the core of them lay a very trivial obstacle: they were all *incredibly boring*. The obstacle was a dizzying amount of impenetrable jargon. Code-words, numbers, neologisms, cross-references and countless redactions that made unpacking and unpicking their magnitude a colossal task (and most of the credit for that must go to the journalists of *The Guardian*. Who also did a beautiful job of repackaging a small slice of that data in the *NSA Files: Decoded*).

Our job, as theatre makers, seemed not to be one in which we gave the documents a context, or a fiction to breathe in, but one in which we had to translate and expose the facts, to present them in raw, human terms. With people, together in a room.

The information, we realised, was *supposed* to be boring. It kills the interest, as well as the conversation.

But the complexity of the facts aside, how could we begin to understand global mass-surveillance, culturally as well as theatrically, in a contemporary context? We can (and should) easily forgive ourselves for rapidly scrolling through (or even outright ignoring) the pages and pages of Terms & Conditions that come as part and parcel of the tools that keep us moving and together. Across Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Skype, DropBox, Twitter, and countless other services, we've created a network of information and sociability that's shrunk the world down into a small rectangle we keep in our front pockets. And, as we catalogue digital self in near real-time through images, statuses, running routes and dating preferences, so too have we made normal the idea of surveillance to such an extent that *self*-surveillance is a habitual part of twenty-first century life. As Sarah Bay-Cheng puts it in an article from 2014:

'For a while, people have been tossing around George Orwell's *1984* as a model for understanding the current surveillance environment, but really it's a toxic combination of *1984 and* Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where the drug of choice is ingeniously embedded within the mechanisms of surveillance itself'

In short, if we want to get involved in this new world, we're going to have to get used to being watched. It's a trade, then. An exchange. That's why we ignore those T&C's. But what we didn't know, before the Snowden revelations, was the *horrifying* extent of the trade – what we were *really* giving away.

We *didn't* know that representatives of British and US governments had openly lied, the latter under oath, about the illegal bulk collection of our (your, my) data. Our emails, photos, bank balances, location histories, messages, call data. All harvested, all stored. *Just in case*. We *didn't* know that the UK and US security services were taking, and storing, images from every single live Yahoo! Webchat around the world, *every five minutes*, for at least six years. We *didn't* know that in the UK our internet history is available without a warrant to a staggering *fifty-eight* different agencies, including the Royal Navy and the Food Standards Agency. We didn't know. We didn't sign up for that.

But now we *do* know, and still the tide doesn't seem to be turning. Why? How is it that in late-2017, a full four years after the Snowden revelations, there has been next-to-no legal action, prosecution, or parliamentary reform with regards to mass-surveillance?

Quite possibly the single most influential factor, and something *A Machine…* doesn't shy away from, is the leverage afforded to the security services by the atrocities of 9/11. Indeed, one can genuinely sympathise with a government that wants more tools at their disposal to avert such a tragic loss of life. But what began with the US STELLAR WIND programme and Patriot Act in the immediate aftermath of September 2001, as emergency measures, was also the opening of a door just wide enough to allow in the most potent and malleable of human emotions: fear.

In a turbulent age of 24-hour news, global political friction and unrest, the re-emergence of the far right across Europe, Brexit, and the ever-present threat of an act of international terror (the UK's threat level has never been below 'substantial' in the last eleven years, and is mostly 'severe' or 'critical'), it's easy to see how ready we are to welcome the insidious machine of surveillance in with open arms. But look closely, and the world we're sold doesn't quite match up with the facts.

You may have already heard impassioned defences of mass-surveillance that begin or end with the argument that "if you've done nothing wrong, you've got nothing to hide". The logic is easy to follow: good, kind, thoughtful folk like you and me – aside from perhaps some minor misdemeanours – pose no threat to national safety. They're not looking for us; we're the haystack the needles are hiding in. If it keeps us safe, if it keeps us alive and well, why should it matter?

The answer is quite simple. If you *think* you're being watched, your behaviour changes. Over time, the possibility for revolution and revolt, for protest and

dissidence, vanishes. Over time, the ability to even *think* of a different state of affairs, a different world, vanishes, too (a kind of ‘non-thinking’ that Henry Giroux terms *disimagination*).

As a small collection of citizens who happen to also make theatre, we’re not happy that our government is and has been indiscriminately spying on us. We want you to know what’s happening. What we need to realise, collectively, is that once we’ve let state-sanctioned mass-surveillance in, it’s very *very* difficult to ask it to leave.

A Machine they’re Secretly Building isn’t a performance that has all the answers, but it is, I hope, one that starts to ask the right questions.