

Dangerous art and suspicious packages

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The drama of suspicious packages

In December 2002, an art student Clinton Boisvert at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan was arrested for placing around the Union Square subway station 38 black boxes with the word 'fear' painted in white letters. According to one report, 'The bomb squad was called in and the station was shut for five hours ... causing a ripple effect of chaos on the network, as panicked commuters and transit workers feared a terrorist attack' (Burkeman 2002). The student was charged with reckless endangerment, an offence that carries a penalty of up to one year in jail. He was sentenced to six days of community service (Buckley 2006).

Nearly four years later, two Pratt Institute sculpture students Robert Barrett and Jamie Davis placed five 'suspicious packages' in the same subway system, presumably as a 'site-specific installation'. The offending packages consisted of a cardboard tube and four bags, stuffed with copies of *The New York Post* and comic strips. The packages were labelled with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's slogan 'If you see something, say something' and the phone number (888) NYC-SAFE. Barrett reportedly told police that he wanted to highlight the ineffectiveness of the Transit Authority's campaign that urged

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citizens to report suspicious packages. Both students were charged with five counts of 'placing false bombs in mass transit areas, a felony punishable by up to seven years in prison' (Buckley 2006).

A Canadian 'street artist' who goes by the name Posterchilds created a trend of making painted cardboard blocks after the Nintendo game Mario Bros and placing them in public places. Posterchilds regards his public installations as 'both playful and political'; he focuses on 'thought-provoking works that uncomfortably straddle concepts of activism, advertising, graffiti, pranks, and vandalism' (Posterchilds 2006). However, five teenage girls in Ravenna, Ohio got into trouble when they decided to follow suit and put 17 Mario blocks outside public buildings as an April Fool's Day joke in 2006. This led to HAZMAT crews and the bomb squad being called. One media story said that the girls 'could face criminal charges' (WFMY News 2 2006).

A similar incident in the same month involving five 'suspected nail bombs' created a major drama in west London with police helicopters, bomb squad officers, ambulances and road closures. The packages turned out to be the 'works of art' of a local woman (BBC News 2006).

These incidents sparked the usual controversy about whether such forms of expression should be regarded as 'art'. One media account explained the works as attempts to reclaim public space:

Artists routinely challenge society's understanding of what is acceptable. These days, as more of our public spaces are placed under the rubric of 'security', ceded to the 'war on terror', some artists are working to reclaim them (Kyllo 2006).

Others were not so sympathetic. A law enforcement officer in the Barrett and Davis case was quoted as saying: 'This is not a mischievous thing or a joke that we take lightly ... Hysteria could easily happen. My squad was all going there when they could be helping in other places of the city' (Buckley 2006). Even the dean of the Pratt's School of Art and Design reportedly condemned the installation: 'There's a difference between challenging paintings and thought-provoking conceptual projects and criminal activity ... This was shouting fire in a crowded

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theater' (Buckley 2006). The Police Chief of Ravenna, Ohio, was similarly not amused with the Mario blocks; he was quoted as saying: 'In today's day and age, you just cannot do this kind of stuff' (Kyllo 2006).

Whether deliberately or not, these artistic performances have raised awareness of the extent to which societies such as ours have become so steeped in suspicion that there is no room for discretion: even playful objects such as Mario blocks could not be assumed to be harmless. So what is it about this 'day and age' that causes public art to be regarded as a 'criminal activity'? Obviously, the political context of the 'war on terror' is central to the new culture of suspicion (Ericson 2007).

From mystery to suspicion

Paper-wrapped packages have not always been objects of suspicion. In fact, there is something both mysterious and promising about wrapped packages in Western cultures. Gifts are typically covered in opaque papers that disguise their content, perhaps so that the recipients are suitably surprised and delighted. Goods purchased by phone or through the internet are sent wrapped in protective papers and their arrival usually eagerly anticipated by the shoppers. Even the 'plain brown envelopes' that contain embarrassing or politically sensitive information are welcomed objects that promise the unveiling of secrets or solving of mysteries. In the more relaxed era of the late 1950s, 'brown paper packages tied up with strings' were regarded as among Rodger and Hammerstein's 'favourite things'. So when did we start regarding packages as suspicious?

The history of the 'suspicious package' is probably at least 50 years old. Concerns about unattended packages or bags in public places were kept alive by bombing incidents in the 1960s to 1990s. The 'war on drugs' which began in the late 1960s also contributed to our suspicion against mail packages and travel baggage; these were often randomly checked for illegal substances. The 9/11 attacks, however, marked a

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quantum leap in the escalation of security procedures worldwide. Packages and bags are now routinely scanned in airports and often opened and searched for hazardous substances.

The anthrax scare of 2001 no doubt added to the paranoia against suspicious packages. Though only four letters containing anthrax (*Bacillus Anthracis*) were actually recovered, the event cast a lasting shadow of suspicion over mail packages:

The anthrax attack in 2001 was one of the most serious crises ever faced by a postal administration. This event caused the American public to question the very safety and security of their mail. While the level of human tragedy, five deaths, was relatively small; the psychological impact on a large portion of the US population was significant. In the classic sense of a terrorist attack, there was an asymmetric relationship between perception and reality (Day 2003: 110).

The performance artists mentioned earlier may have tapped into a deep vein of anxiety felt by the public, but real life is actually more dramatic than art. Since 2001 there have been numerous instances of buildings being evacuated and airports being shut down as a result of the discovery of 'suspicious packages' (for example CNN 2005; *The Age* 2005; USA Today 2006; Fox News 2006). Most of the incidents turned out to be hoaxes or unintended errors. Nevertheless, the consequences of these incidents were non-trivial: the incident that shut down Atlanta Airport for two hours disrupted at least 120 flights (Fox News 2006).

Even when suspicious packages turned out to be harmless, citizens continued to live in fear and anxiety because no attempts were made to calm them or allay their anxiety. A recent media investigation of 'Australia's biggest biological terror scare' in 2005 is an excellent illustration of the political capital that suspicious packages could carry. Using documents obtained under freedom of information, the journalist found that the white powder in a letter to the Indonesian embassy turned out to contain 'a commonly occurring bacteria' (Moore 2006). Despite receiving this advice, the government did not inform the media that

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the substance posed no threat. As a result, the news of a bio-terror attack dominated media headlines the following day. On the day of the ‘attack’, both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Affairs Minister called the powder a ‘biological agent’; the PM told reporters that ‘sending the powder to the embassy was an act of “murderous criminality”’ (Moore 2006). The scare had managed to hose down an extremely negative wave of public opinion against the Indonesian government:

The description of the powder as a biological agent torpedoed a wave of public anger directed at the Indonesian Government and its justice system that had been building for five days after a Bali court convicted Schapelle Corby of drug smuggling on May 27 (Moore 2006).

The constitution of suspicion

The perception that something is suspicious is a cultural construction. Mary Douglas’s (1966) analysis of purity and danger provides a useful way of conceptualising suspiciousness. According to Douglas, our conception of purity presupposes the existence of a moral order which classifies and locates objects or actions in a preferred manner. Purity is violated when an object is out of place:

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on (Douglas 1966: 48).

Suspiciousness is similarly based on the assumption of a particular moral order. Social studies of police have shown that when law enforcement officers go around their beat, they look for things that are ‘sus’ or out of order. For example, in *Cop It Sweet*, Jenny Brockie’s documentary of police in Redfern, Sydney, a ‘sus’ car was a red Laser car driven by an Aborigine (Chan 1997: 78). Similarly, Ericson notes the tendency for police patrol officers to develop indicators of

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abnormality: these include '1) individuals out of place, 2) individuals in particular places, 3) individuals of particular types regardless of place, and 4) unusual circumstances regarding property' (1982: 86). The production of suspicion is therefore driven first by a theory of 'normality': certain objects or people are supposed to be in certain places, doing certain things. But surveillance is also a necessary ingredient for the imputation of suspicion: we start to notice and observe, and we look for indicators of incongruence, which then become grounds for suspicion.

In the case of the suspicious package, there have been detailed instructions of what to look for — the giveaway signs. An FBI Advisory (Figure 1, see <http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/pressrel01/mail3.pdf>), for example, notes the following indicators of abnormality:

- No return address
- Restrictive markings
- Possibly mailed from a foreign country
- Excessive postage
- Misspelt words
- Addressed to title only or incorrect title
- Protruding wires
- Lopsided or uneven
- Rigid or bulky
- Strange odour
- Wrong title with name
- Oily stains
- Discolorations
- Crystallization on wrapper
- Excessive tape or string.

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FBI Advisory

If you receive a suspicious letter or package

What should you do?

- 1 Handle with care
Don't shake or bump**
- 2 Isolate and look
for indicators**
- 3 Don't Open, Smell
or Taste**
- 4 Treat it as Suspect
Call 911**

If parcel is open and/or a threat is identified...

<p>For a Bomb</p> <p>Evacuate Immediately Call 911 (Police) Contact local FBI</p>	<p>For Radiological</p> <p>Limit Exposure - Don't Handle Distance (Evacuate area) Shield yourself from object Call 911 (Police) Contact local FBI</p>	<p>For Biological or Chemical</p> <p>Isolate - Don't Handle Call 911 (Police) Wash your hands with soap and warm water Contact local FBI</p>
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Police Department _____
 Fire Department _____
 Local FBI Office _____
 (Ask for the Duty Agent, Special Agent Bomb Technician, or Weapons of Mass Destruction Coordinator)

ILLUSTRATION: PHOTODISC CORP. (11/17/03) 2003 ©
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Figure 1: FBI Advisory on Suspicious Letter or Package

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website also contains detailed information on how to recognise and handle a suspicious package (CDC 2003). Similar instructions can be found in most organisations that handle large volumes of mail or where large numbers of people may be affected by a terrorist attack. For example,

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the University of New South Wales' Emergency Procedures Manual contains the following instructions in relation to suspicious packages under 'Information regarding bomb, chemical, biological and radiation attacks':

If a suspicious package or device is found, DO NOT TOUCH IT. Immediately evacuate the area and have all people move as far as is possible away from the suspicious package or device. Remember this. If you can see the suspicious package or device, it can see you. Evacuate to a position of safety where you cannot see the device. Therefore if it explodes, you greatly reduce the likelihood of being injured (UNSW 2005: 67).

No doubt there is a risk that a mailed or found package may contain a bomb or some biological weapon. However, as Ericson points out, 'risk is the way organizations make sense of their environment and act upon it' and it is through risk management that 'the politics of uncertainty' is played out (2007: 11). Given that it is not possible to estimate the risk of terrorist attacks with any degree of precision using scientific means, risk management is reduced to a 'precautionary logic' which imagines the worst and prepares for it:

Decisions are therefore not made in a context of certainty, nor even available knowledge, but of doubt, suspicion, premonition, foreboding, challenge, mistrust, fear, and anxiety (Ewald 2002: 294, quoted in Ericson 2007: 23).

This precautionary logic has long been adopted by police patrol officers who prefer to be 'overly suspicious rather than overly trusting when approaching citizens' (Chan 1997: 234). It is a 'minimax' strategy that minimises the maximum risk in their work (Muir 1977: 166-167). Since the events of 9/11, this logic has permeated our social life and in many ways has fuelled further suspicion (Ericson 2007: 23). Much of this has been accomplished by government campaigns to involve the public to participate in their war on terror.

Recruiting the public — ‘We’re all police now’

Most commentators of surveillance have emphasised its technological dimension: the use of CCTV, hidden cameras, biometrics, scanners, dataveillance, and so on. It has got to the point that surveillance is now synonymous with technology. But if government advertising campaigns are to be any guide, the surveillance of suspicious packages can be an extremely ‘low-tech’ activity: ordinary citizens are now recruited to be security workers. Instead of technology being the extension of our senses, we have become an extension of the surveillance apparatus. The posters put out by various government agencies are telling ordinary citizens to be vigilant and pull their weight in the war against terror; they help sharpen our eyes to recognise suspicious packages, people, and circumstances. In many ways, this is a campaign not unlike those we have had for years in local communities — a grand extension of the Neighbourhood Watch.

The advertising campaign by the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority, referred to earlier in relation to the artists Barrett and Davis, is an excellent example of recruiting the public to be part of the terrorist watch. The slogan ‘IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING’ was printed in big black letters against a bright yellow background, together with the warning ‘BE SUSPICIOUS OF ANYTHING UNATTENDED’ in smaller red letters. The picture above the slogan shows a row of empty seats on a train and a brown paper bag with heavy oily stains on the floor. Citizens are urged to ‘Tell a cop, an MTA employee or call 1-888-NYC-SAFE’ (see http://www.mta.info/mta/security/images/?file=LIRR_TrainTalk.jpg).

Australians are familiar with the ‘Help Protect Australia from Terrorism’ posters, which represented the war on terror as an exercise in putting together a jigsaw puzzle: ‘Small pieces of information from members of the public can help keep Australia safe from terrorism. Police and security agencies are working hard but you could help them complete the picture’ (see Figure 2). Under the heading ‘Every piece of information helps’, the poster asks citizens to look out for unusual

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activities such as surveillance or filming of official buildings, cars parked in public places for a long time, packages abandoned in public places, suspicious purchases of chemicals or explosives, and unusual uses of garages.

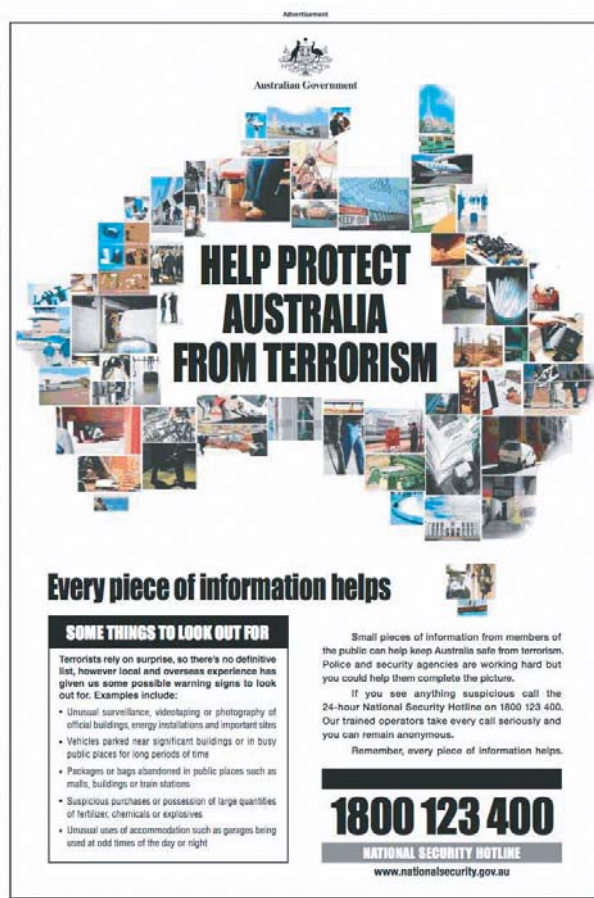


Figure 2: Australian Government Campaign Poster.
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Similar posters have been used in the London Metropolitan Police in the UK to warn citizens to look out for suspicious bags, unusual activities and seemingly ordinary situations. One series of posters with a heading 'terrorism: HELP US DEFEAT IT' shows images of unattended bags or briefcases on the street, in a mall, or on public transport. They raise questions about the 'innocence' of these objects: 'Innocent bin bag or terrorist bomb? Innocent box or incendiary device? Innocent briefcase or terrorist bomb?' Citizens are urged not to touch the object, warn others, move away and call 999: 'If you suspect it, report it' (Figure 3). A more recent series put the responsibility for foiling terrorist attempts squarely on citizens: 'Terrorist won't succeed if someone reports suspicious bags, vehicles or behaviour. You are that someone. Call 999.' (Figure 4) These posters, printed in deep red with black and white photographs cropped to narrow horizontal windows suggestive of someone peeking through a small opening, extend the net of vigilance to include other kinds of 'suspicious' people or activities:

- Terrorists need places to live. Are you suspicious of your tenants or neighbours?
- Terrorists need storage. Are you suspicious of anyone using garages, lock-ups or storage space?
- Terrorists need funding. Have any cheque or credit card transactions made you suspicious?
- Terrorists need transport. Has a vehicle sale or rental made you suspicious?

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Figure 3: London Metropolitan Police Campaign Poster (1).
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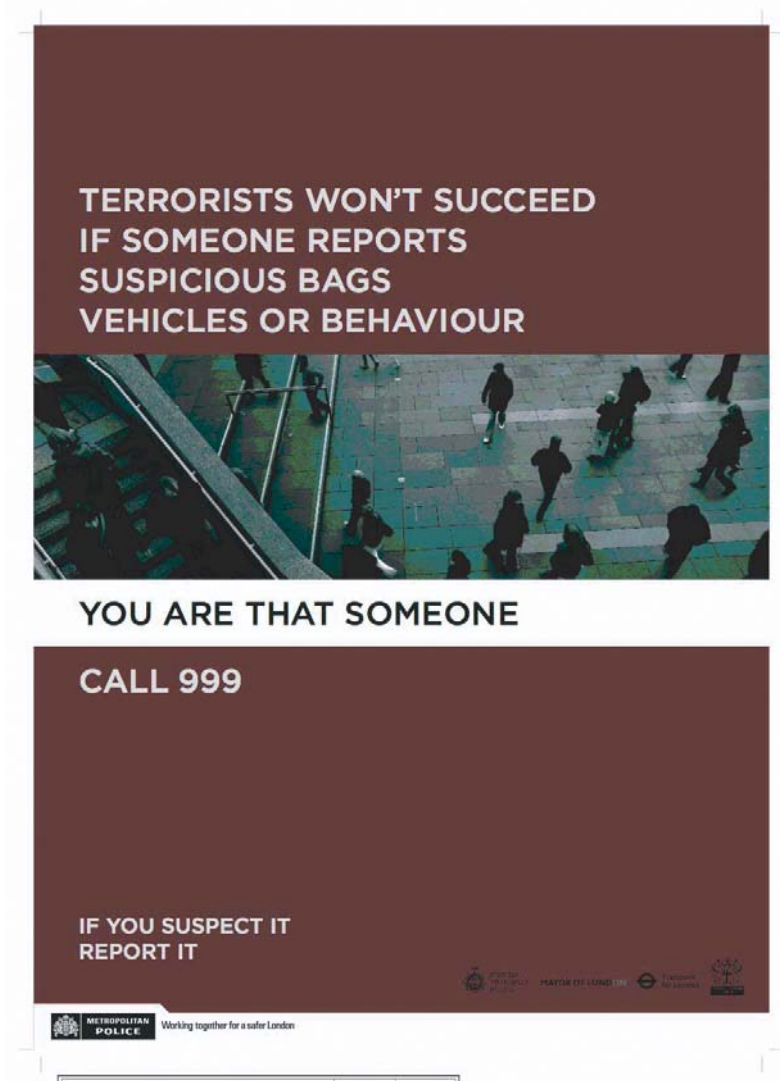


Figure 4: London Metropolitan Police Campaign Poster (2).
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While these advertising campaigns may reflect the fact that police and government cannot fight the war on terror without citizens' help, especially when the July 2005 bombings in London have been found to be the work of 'home grown' terrorists, a more important underlying factor of these campaigns may be the necessity to engage the public and turn them into active supporters of the war against terror. There was a revealing quote by John Rendon, a US 'public relations guru' which suggests that the US is in fact fighting two wars, one against 'real terrorists' and the other against 'potential terrorists', or more accurately, a war to win over potential allies:

That means in reality, the threat comes not from the 12-million people, the 1%, the threat comes from the rest, if we don't get them engaged in the nature of this conflict. What we need to do is ... we need to turn the street into an active ally and away from being a passive observer (John Rendon, quoted in ABC 2006).

It is not clear how successful these campaigns have been in turning citizens into active allies and informants. Since 2001, the Australian government's total cumulative security and counter-terrorism expenditure is over \$6.7 billion (Engineer Australia 2006). The irony is that in some sense the terrorists have already won the war: Western countries like Australia are becoming paranoid and fearful. If watching out for suspicious packages and people is a grand version of Neighbourhood Watch, we should take note from criminological research studies that found that Neighbourhood Watch is not only ineffective in reducing crime where crime is a problem, in some instances they can heighten fear of crime while contributing nothing to community cohesion (Rosenbaum 1988). In an ironic way, then, these advertising campaign posters may be the real 'dangerous art': they can heighten paranoia and divide communities, while slowly but surely undermining trust, tolerance and freedom that constitute the very fabric of democratic civil society.¹

Conclusion

This article has examined art making that may be regarded as dangerous in the current climate of insecurity. It has raised the issue of how the ‘suspicious package’ has infiltrated our consciousness through government campaigns for citizens to take part in the war against terror. It is obvious that we cannot rest assured by the sophistication of surveillance technology available to the authorities. We — humans with limited ranges and capabilities in our sight, hearing and attention span — are asked to be extensions of the surveillance apparatus. Instead of feeling safe because of all the security measures being undertaken, we are told to be eternally alert and vigilant. In effect, the fear of terrorists has been made central to our ‘risk portfolio’ — the set of risks, fears and hopes that we feel strongly about (Hacking 2003: 33). With our eyes trained to recognise abnormality — we have been gradually developing the habitus of a police patrol officer — being constantly suspicious, trusting no one and often resorting to stereotyping and unreliable visual cues to jump to conclusions (cf Chan 1997). The danger of institutionalising a precautionary logic in everyday life is, as Ericson suggests, we have constructed for ourselves a culture of suspicion:

In this new world of catastrophic imagination and uncertainty, there is a shift from the ‘culture of control’ to a culture of suspicion. We are all suspects now, at once suspected of never doing enough for homeland security and of being a possible source of terror, big or little. As such we are all watchers as well as watched and the bearers of our own control. The inevitable result is not just a chilly climate, but a new cold war of suspicion and fear. There is the well-documented increase in distrust of people and institutions, discriminatory practices, and fragmentation into population segments of aliens and the alienated (Ericson 2007: 214).

Far from creating a community of active citizens that look out and care for each other, our current obsession with security may have in fact transformed the ideal of the public sphere with interactive citizenship into what van Oenen calls, following Robert Pfaller and

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Slavoj Žižek, an ‘interpassive securityscape’ (2004: 7). As citizens, we have been made to feel responsible for our own security, and yet we are aware of our limited ability to change anything. Increasingly, we are relying on others — the government, police, private security and technology — to do the work for us:

Involvement or engagement is delegated, outsourced. We would like to get involved, but we no longer believe we can; therefore we ask others to get involved, on our behalf. ... What the modern citizen wants is not to commit, but merely to ‘join’. He does not want to act, but merely to appear. Whatever happens, he is neither for nor against, but simply ‘present’. The contemporary citizen is, in short, a one-person flash mob. He seeks protection and security, but in doing so only makes the public domain more unstable and more insecure (van Oenen 2004: 7, 16).

Surveillance may have made the invisible visible, but the task of the postmodern artists is to show ‘that there is still something invisible in the visible’ (Weibel 2002: 209, following Lyotard).

The outrage against artists who placed suspicious packages in public places was perhaps less about the fear and anxiety these packages provoked, but the fact that they had ‘offended interpassive sensitivities’ (van Oenen 2004: 13). Our fear and anxiety about the possibility of terrorist attacks was an issue ‘considered too sensitive to exploit for an art project’ (2004: 13). The artists were guilty of mocking us and embarrassing us by making explicit and unveiling the ‘secret excess’ of our interpassivity (2004: 14). They also make visible the hidden pleasure we derive from the surveillance apparatus that transforms exhibitionism and voyeurism ‘from illegitimate to legitimate pleasures’ (Weibel 2002: 208).

This article starts from a position of realism: terrorist attacks are real; they are not a social construction or a product of political manipulation. But our reactions and responses to them are constituted and shaped by cultural assumptions and political conditions. It is perhaps symptomatic of how far we have gone in the swinging pendulum between complacency and fear that in a meeting I attended to discuss policing and security, a high-level security manager expressed

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frustration with the current public and government over-reaction to suspicious circumstances. He said half-jokingly that when people found white powder in a baby-changer in the toilet, he wished they would call the cleaners rather than the HAZMAT squad. It may be that in our panic over 9/11 and other terrorist attacks, we have lost the capacity to distinguish between guilt and innocence, real and imagined danger. Our obsession and impotence in relation to security issues may be an excuse we use to turn ourselves into interpassive citizens, who feel an obligation to do 'our bit' against terrorism, but have sat back and let governments and the culture of suspicion take over or destroy our cherished institutions in the name of protecting them.

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Note

- 1 I am grateful to Richard Ericson for this insight.

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