

The Art of Disclosure. Interview with Laura Poitras

By Tatiana Bazzichelli

The recent debate on the PRISM, XKeyscore and TEMPORA Internet surveillance programs, based on the Edward Snowden release of NSA material, symbolizes an increasing geopolitical control. New identities emerge: whistleblowers, cypherpunks, hacktivists and individuals that bring attention to abuses of government and large corporations, making the act of leaking a central part of their strategy. The conference stream 'Hashes to Ashes' highlights the current pervasive process of silencing—and metaphorically reducing to ashes—activities which expose misconducts in political, technological and economical systems, as well as to reflect on what burns underneath such process, advocating a different scenario. In these pages is a conversation with American documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras, who has chronicled America post-9/11 with her films *My Country, My Country* (2006), *The Oath* (2010) and an upcoming work on the surveillance state and Edward Snowden's disclosures. Along with Glenn Greenwald, she brought to light the documents of the NSA affair. At transmediale 2014, with independent security analyst Jacob Appelbaum and artist and geographer Trevor Paglen, Poitras will take part in the keynote event 'Art as Evidence'.

The following interview is excerpted from a longer interview conducted in person on November 28, 2013, and by email. The full interview will be published in January 2014 during transmediale.

Tatiana Bazzichelli:
By working on your documentaries about America post-9/11 and as a journalist exposing the NSA's surveillance programs you have taken many risks, especially reporting on the lives of other people at risk. How do you deal with being both a subject and an observer in your work?

Laura Poitras:
How I navigate being both an observer, and being a participant, is different with each film. In the first film I made in Iraq, *My Country, My Country*, when I started working on post-9/11 issues, I am not in the film. That was a conscious decision because I didn't want it to be a film about a reporter in a dangerous place. I wanted the sympathy to be for the Iraqis. But in 2006 I became a target of the U.S. government and started being detained at the U.S. border, so I have been pushed into the story more and more.

Now I am working on a documentary about NSA surveillance and the Edward Snowden disclosures, and I

will acknowledge my presence in the story because I have many different roles: I am the filmmaker, I am the person who Snowden contacted to share his disclosures—along with Glenn Greenwald, I am documenting the process of the reporting—and I am reporting. There is no way I can pretend I am not part of the story.

In terms of risk, the people I have filmed put their lives on the line. That was the case in Iraq, Yemen, and certainly now with Snowden's disclosures. Snowden, William Binney, Thomas Drake, Jacob Appelbaum, Julian Assange, and Glenn. Each of them is taking huge risks to expose the scope of NSA surveillance. There are definitely risks I take in making these films, but they are lesser than the people that I have documented.

The previous films you directed tell us that history is a puzzle of events, and it is impossible to combine them without accessing pieces hidden by power forces. Do you think your films reached the objectives you wanted to

communicate?

Doing this work on America post-9/11 issues I'm interested in documenting how America exerts power in the world. I'm against the documentary tradition of just going to the 'third world' and filming people suffering outside of context. I don't want the audience to think that it's some other reality that they have no connection with. I want to emotionally implicate them in the events they are seeing.

In terms of if my films reach their 'objectives', I think people assume because I make films with political content that I'm interested in political outcomes or messages, but actually the success or failure of the films has to do with whether they succeed as films. Do they take the audience on a journey, do they inform, do they challenge, and connect emotionally, etc.

I made a film about the occupation of Iraq, but it didn't end the Iraq war. Does that make it a failure? The surveillance film will have more impact than my previous films,

because of the magnitude of Snowden's disclosures, but those disclosures are somewhat outside the documentary. Documentaries don't exist to break news; they need to provide more lasting qualities to stand up over time. The issues in the film are about government surveillance and abuses of power, the loss of privacy and threat to the free Internet, etc., but the core of the film is about what happens when very few people take enormous risks to expose power and wrongdoing.

Why did you start working on your trilogy about America post-9/11? How did such topics change your way to see society and politics?

I was in New York on 9/11, and the days after you really felt that the world could go in so many different directions. We went down a path of revenge, charting a new course of American history. In the aftermath of 9/11, and particularly in the buildup to the Iraq war, I felt that I had skills that can be used to understand and document what was happening. So I decided to

document the occupation. What are the human consequences of what we're doing, and not just for Iraqis but also for the military that were asked to undertake this really flawed policy?

I didn't think I was making a series of films about America post-9/11. I was naive and thought the U.S. had made a wrong turn, and that we would get back to some kind of rule of law. America was exercising its power pre-9/11, but not with things like legalizing torture. To justify torture in legal memos, or have a prison where people can be held indefinitely without charge, that is a new chapter.

As an American citizen, the policies are done in my name. I have a certain platform and protection as a U.S. citizen that allows me to address and expose these issues with less risk than others. Glenn and I have talked about this—about the obligation we have to investigate these policies.

Were you imagining this kind of parable would be touching people in their daily lives, like what's happening with ethical resisters and whistleblowers?

I never imagined there would be this kind of attacks on whistleblowers and journalists. Look at the resources the U.S. has used in the post-9/11 era—and for what? More people now hate us. I have seen that first hand. It's baffling how the priorities have been calculated.

I think we are in a new era where in the name of national security everything can be transgressed. The United States is doing things that I think if you had imagined it thirteen years ago you would be shocked. Like drone strikes. How did we become a country that assassinates people from the sky? Is that what you think of when you think of a democracy?

What is the last part of the trilogy teaching you, and how is this new experience adding meaning to the others described in the previous movies? What is coming next?

The world that Snowden's disclosures have opened is so terrifying. I have been in war zones, and I think that this is so much scarier. How this power operates and how it can strip citizens of the fundamental

right to communicate and associate freely. The scope of the surveillance is so vast.

About what's next, I imagine that I will work on the issue of surveillance beyond the film. The scope of it goes beyond any one film.

The fact that you are a woman dealing with sensitive subjects, traveling alone filming across off-limit countries, and developing technical skills to protect your data makes you very unique. How do you see such experiences from a woman/gender perspective?

Speaking about technology, I do not think it is gender specific. Women can operate cameras, learn how to use encryption. I have good instincts of security, and I know how to figure out how to use tools, and I know how to ask questions when I need to. Because I have experienced being detained at the U.S. border for so many years, I know that the risk is real to protect source material. I think that if you perceive the State as dangerous or a threat, which I do as a journalist who needs to protect source material, you learn how to use these tools.

In terms of being a woman doing work in the field, overall it has made the work easier. In the Iraqi context, to be a woman allowed me more access because it is a very gendered segregated society. If I was a man I would have not been able to live in the same house with the people I was filming. I was able to film with the women and also hang out and film with men. As a western woman you can get a sort of free pass in both places. The idea of being a woman in a risky situation maybe allowed me to have a certain kind of access that I would not have otherwise.

When I finished *The Oath*, the first thing that Abu Jandal told me was that he was surprised I just came and worked on my own, alone. I also got access because often I work without a crew. I was breaking every normative rule, being alone in these countries, going to war zones, filming, etc. I think they just thought that I was from another planet.

In my writing I claim that networking is an artwork. The point is not to produce artistic

objects, but to generate contexts of connectivity among people that are often unpredictable. Do you think that entering in connection with Snowden contributed to produce an artwork in the form of ethical resistance?

I feel that this film, or the experience of working on this film, has spilled outside of the filmmaking. In addition to making the film, many other things have emerged. Connections and relationships have been built. But all those kinds of things, and this network that happened because the branching out of a more linear storytelling, because I was working on the film... I was also doing a surveillance teach-in at Whitney with Jacob Appelbaum and William Binney, then a short film, and then when Snowden contacted me, that changed everything.

Why do you think Snowden trusted you?

I think he felt that if these disclosures are going to make an impact, that he wanted to reach out to people who were going to do it in a way that wasn't going to be contained. Glenn and I have both been outspoken on the topic of surveillance, and we had a track record of not being easily intimidated.

I found it a really mature gesture that he decided to come out because he was afraid that other people could have been incriminated.

When I received the email that said that, I was in shock for days. I thought my role as a journalist in this context was to protect his identity, and then he said, "What I'm asking you is not to protect my identity, but the opposite, to expose it." And then he explained his reasons about how he didn't want to cause harm to others, and that in the end it would lead back to him.

I suppose you were also really shocked that Snowden is a really young guy.

I was completely shocked when I met Snowden, and I saw how young he was. I literally could not believe it. I assumed he would be somebody much older, someone in the latter part of his career and life. I never imagined someone so young. In retrospect, I understand it.

One of the most moving things that Snowden said when we were interviewing him in Hong Kong was that he remembers the Internet before it was surveilled. He said that mankind has never created anything like it—a tool where people of all ages and cultures can communicate and engage in dialogue.

You are part of transmediale 2014 with Jacob Appelbaum and Trevor Paglen in the keynote event 'Art as Evidence'. How can art be evidence, and how do you put such concept into practice via your work?

What we're doing in the talk is thinking about what are the tools of communication we can use to translate evidence or information beyond revealing the facts, so that people experience that information differently, not just intellectually but emotionally. Art allows so many ways to enter into a dialogue with an audience, and that's a practice that I have done in my work, and that Trevor does with his secret geographies, and that Jake does with his photography. We engage with the world in some kind of factual way, but we're also translating information that we're confronted with and sharing it with an audience. What we're going to try to do is to explore those concepts and give examples of that.

We will combine each of our areas of interest and expertise. I think one of the topics we might discuss is space and surveillance. Trevor has been filming spy satellites. We have some other ideas. I don't want to say too much.