H&R Block Artspace exhibit keeps an eye on the crowd
H&R Block Artspace exhibit works on the paranoia of the American public.
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Hasan Elahi’s 7-channel video installation “Calibration” (2011) records the details of the artist’s daily existence through 1,000 days worth of digital footage. The artist began surveilling himself and streaming the results on the web after the FBI interrogated him as a potential terrorist.

“On Watch,” the latest in a string of thoughtful global exhibits curated by Block Artspace director Raechell Smith, is ostensibly a show about surveillance.

But what we’re really pushed to think about by the exhibit’s films, videos and photographs is the state of the American psyche, post-9/11.

More than 10 years after the attack, we remain nervous, suspicious, watchful and ready to sacrifice some of our own — and others’ — privacy and freedoms for the sake of safety. And these days, as reflected in recent news reports about Iran’s nuclear program, perceived threats are immediately met with talk of military solutions.

The most dramatic illustration of how much things have changed is provided by Belgian-born Nicolas Provost’s 15-minute film “Plot Point,” shot with a hidden camera on the streets of New York City. Provost’s footage of ordinary people walking, talking and milling about provokes an acute sense of unease, a feeling abetted by his frequent inclusion of shots of policeman in their typical state of suspicious alertness.

At various times, Provost’s camera lingers on individuals, whom we automatically perceive as potential threats or targets. We tense as people exchange glances; we wonder if a passing bus will explode.
Everything about this film, from the ominous soundtrack to its borrowings from Hollywood thrillers, elicits an expectation that something bad is about to happen. Watching it, we realize how our perception of urban throngs has irrevocably changed since the attacks of 9/11.

“Plot Point’s” surprise ending unleashes an entirely different set of emotional responses. As Smith says, “I want to believe that someone can protect us.”

An underlying theme of “On Watch” is the West’s fraught relationship with the Middle East. In her 14-minute film “Shadow Sites,” Iraqi-born, London-based artist Jananne Al-Ani uses an aerial camera to record the mesmerizing and mysterious beauty of the ancient desert landscape.

As it slowly pans across stripes of green plantings, broad expanses of sand and the geometric footprints of old settlements and archaeological sites, Al-Ani’s footage offers a quietly dramatic counter to the West’s customary view of this landscape as an arena for rolling tanks, dusty troops and burning oil fields — a place filled with hidden nuclear stockpiles, IEDs ready to kill and maim, and hostile enclaves.

The desert of “Shadow Sites” is peaceful, filled with reminders of the march of civilizations across this land and other human and geological traces. Yet like the military reconnaissance photographs that inspired her, Al-Ani’s imagery also means to evoke the West’s depersonalization of the landscape of the Middle East.

In her essay in the accompanying brochure, Smith notes the “dehumanized perspective” that characterized Gulf War broadcasts and their creation of “a visual narrative that extracted people and culture from the landscape.” Al-Ani, who grew up in Iraq and didn’t leave until the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war in 1980, knows differently.

In the past, Taysir Batniji has made work about the difficulties involved in getting in and out of his native Gaza, including long waits at the Egyptian border.

When he decided to do a photographic series about Israeli watchtowers on the West Bank, Batniji didn’t try to return — “As a Palestinian born in Gaza I am not authorized to return to the West Bank” — but asked a Palestinian photographer to shoot them for him.

The series was inspired, the artist has said, by German artists Bernd and Hilla Becher’s well-known images of water towers, which Batniji saw in an exhibit at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, where he now lives.

“I wanted to create an illusion, a sort of ‘Trojan horse,’ in which a spectator standing before my typologies would believe them to be part of the Bechers’ oeuvre,” he explains in an artist statement on his website. But the differences are stark, because the circumstances were so different.

“One cannot install the heavy equipment of the Bechers or take the time to frame the perfect position, let alone afford to wait days for the ideal light conditions,” Batniji notes.

There is a surreptitious, on-the-fly quality to these “Watchtower” photographs that points to the “perilous conditions” involved in taking them. Although the images are grainy and slightly blurred, the battered, sometimes masklike aspect of the towers and the ugliness of their concrete, clay and and scrub grass surroundings is plain to see.

In 2002, the FBI pegged Hasan Elahi as a potential terrorist. An American citizen, born in Bangladesh, the artist and university professor wrote about his ordeal, including hours of interrogation and multiple polygraphs, in an October 2011 opinion column in the New York Times. He also explained his decision to save the Feds the trouble of tracking him by doing it himself.

Elahi’s Web-based project “Tracking Transience” was designed to record the artist’s whereabouts at every minute of every day. The site has registered hits not just from the FBI but from the Pentagon, the CIA and the
In “Calibration” (2011), Elahi replays 1,000 days worth of digital footage from “Tracking Transience” on seven vertical monitors representing the seven days of the week. Colorful blurred images of buildings, interiors and meals play on the upper zones of the monitors; satellite images of his global position at different moments appear below them. But in this incarnation, the effect is more poetic than informational. The details of Elahi’s day-to-day existence take on the appearance of luminous, moving abstract patterns.

Elahi also created a site-specific piece for “On Watch,” filming the intersection of 43rd and Main streets on the Saturday after the show’s opening. The footage of cars, buses and pedestrians, stopping at the traffic lights and moving through the intersection, plays on a framed monitor at the back of the gallery. If the monitor were a window, this is the view it would provide.

The late Mark Lombardi began practicing his own brand of surveillance in the 1990s, making large diagrammatic drawings linking the various government, corporate and individual entities involved in major scandals from Iran-Contra to the savings and loan debacle.

In “Indian Springs St. Bank,” Lombardi lays out the network of players and financial dealings that led to the 1984 collapse of the Kansas City, Kan., bank. People he identifies include the local Civella mob family and the Iranian-born Kansas cattle baron Farhad Azima. Lombardi drew much of his information from the investigative reporting of Houston-based journalist Pete Brewton. His visual mapping of the material includes dotted lines and arrows to show influence and the illicit movement of money.

The largest drawing in the show, from the collection of Elisabeth and Douglas Drake, details a scandal emanating from “International Systems & Controls 1972-77.” The Houston-based company was indicted by the Securities and Exchange Commission for bribing foreign governments and ruling families to secure engineering and construction contracts.

Lombardi’s diagram shows the broad reach of the company’s illegal dealings, which involved Saudi Arabia, Nicaragua, Ivory Coast, Algeria, Chile and Iraq.

Since its founding in 2007 to monitor post-election violence in Kenya, the Ushahidi open source project has practiced a form of constructive surveillance, enlisting everyday people in global hotspots to contribute information to its crowdmapping platform. A touch-screen monitor in the gallery shows how the platform works, including the crisis map created after the Haiti earthquake and segments on the Gulf Oil spill and the Libya migration crisis.

Its founders see Ushahidi as a way of “democratizing information” and providing “an opportunity for everyone to create the narrative.” Ushahidi already has proven itself as a tool for saving lives. Following the Haiti quake, it helped guide international crisis response teams to the people and places most in need of help.

Last April, Ushahidi added “Syria Tracker,” a crowdsourcing effort to document the number of individuals killed, missing and arrested during the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad. “Accounting for these events — current and past — is important for future humanitarian and legal action,” the site explains. It includes instructions about how to submit a report — and how to protect against network surveillance.