

“Conflation: Virtual Presence”
statement by Blaise Tobia, May 2011

“Conflation: Virtual Presence” is a series of works by Blaise Tobia utilizing web sources, video, and sequential photography.

One of the included works, “Surveillance,” was originally created in 1990 for an exhibition in CEPA’s “Gallery in Transit,” a Buffalo city bus dedicated to art, which carried the work for a month, assigned to a different route each day. It was part of an ongoing series of works by Tobia, dating back to 1976, deliberately “conflating” the reception of broadcast media with the potential for secret surveillance via the media device. (This has become a clear reality in current day media/network practice, as schools monitor students at home via laptop cams and iPhones report years of their user’s position data.) “Surveillance” was originally shown on CEPA bus as paired prints in the overhead ad-poster space; the series has been reworked for the current show as a screen-based sequence.

The work “Crossing/Being Seen” includes a real-time streaming webcam feed (maintained by Earthcam) showing the famous London street corner 24-hours per day to anyone in the world who would care to look in. Paired with it is a photographic sequence made by Tobia of London’s SoHo Square, a peaceful urban park that is ringed with high-end establishments that view video surveillance as a matter of course.

The work “Proposal for a 24-Hour Philadelphia Rocky Cam” is a semi-serious suggestion for the City of Philadelphia to develop a worldwide web presence through its best-known contemporary work of public art. The companion work, “Proposal for a 24-Hour Philadelphia Thinker Cam” sets up a parallel project for a now slightly less well-known “big bronze guy” also on the Parkway. As may be raised by “The Crossing” webcam and others, it is becoming our tendency to see ubiquitous surveillance and the loss of privacy as reasonable exchanges not just for security but also for entertainment and creature comfort.

Also included are works incorporating an actual real-time hidden surveillance camera trained on the exhibition’s visitors and a multi-media collage of the extremes of worldwide real-time web streaming.

Ubiquitous surveillance is one of the most problematic legacies of the 20th Century. It represents an aspect of human desire taken to an absurd and unhealthy extreme, supported in large part by technological advances.

In this set of works by Tobia, the unhealthy conflations (confusions) of real and virtual, accessible and inaccessible, innocuous and sinister, are the underlying content.