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Hasan Elahi: Tracking Transience in One on One at SITE Santa Fe

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Hasan Elahi at SITE Santa Fe

Watching the watchers

March 20, 2010

Written by [Leanne Goebel](#)

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On June 19, 2002, Bangladeshi born U.S. Citizen Hasan Elahi handed his passport to a TSA Agent at the Detroit Airport. The agent took a long look at the passport and the blood drained from his lips. Elahi asked him if there was a problem. The problem was that Elahi was on some terrorist watch list. He had been falsely accused of housing explosives in a storage unit in Tampa, Florida, perhaps even confused with someone who had a similar name. Elahi was taken to an INS holding room at the airport and then questioned by the FBI in a stark white room. If it hadn't been for his detailed record keeping and the Palm device he carried with him and referenced to provide a record of his whereabouts to the FBI, things might have turned out differently. As it was it took six months of extended interviews and questioning at a Federal Building in Tampa for the FBI to determine that Elahi was indeed, not a terrorist. He was an artist. An artist it turns out who was interested in mapping, grids and databases.

At the time, Elahi lived in Tampa and was subjected to nine consecutive polygraph tests on his final day of questioning before being cleared by the FBI. However, when Elahi asked for a letter stating that he was no longer a suspect, he was told that the FBI could not provide such a document because in order to formally clear him, they would have had to formally have charged him. Elahi was never charged. In fact, he says he's only met one other person released by the FBI as he was. Most suspects like him were taken to Guantanamo—a place not a part of Cuba nor a part of the United States, but a political non-space.

Elahi asked the FBI what he should do the next time he traveled and the agent provided him with a name and phone number to contact. So, as a pre-emptive measure, before he got on his next flight, Elahi called his agent and told him where he was going, what flights he was taking, and how long he would be gone. The phone calls turned into lengthy emails where he would tell the agent all the details of the beaches in Cambodia and the food at a specific restaurant. No matter how long and elaborate the emails Elahi wrote, he always received the same response: “Thank you. Be safe.”

Security_Comfort



As the data accumulated, Elahi wondered if the FBI was documenting everything correctly. How accurate could their file be? People make mistakes and a bureaucracy of that size could not possibly function with any efficiency. So he began to create his own personal parallel database of information. By Dec. 24, 2003, he was sharing that database of information with the public. He wrote some clunky software and began tracking his every move via his cell phone. A little blinking pixel documents his location and can be tracked on the website “Tracking Transience.” As I write this, Elahi is home in San Francisco. He also photographs the meals he eats, the airports he sits in, the trains and planes he takes to travel, the highway signs, the cars stopping for gas, the toilets he uses, the amount of his banking transactions. Thousands of bits of information are available to track Elahi, but we know very little about him as a person other than he travels a lot, has eaten a lot of airline food, used thousands of urinals, and has an affinity for taco-style dishes.

In 2006, Creative Capital invested in Elahi and helped him to realize “Tracking Transience” as an art project. It debuted at SITE Santa Fe when “One on One” opened on Feb. 6, 2010. Creative Capital is a New York based venture capital organization that provides funding to artists for their projects and trains them to be entrepreneurial in their approach to achieving success in the art world. The organization is a network and provides multiple resources to artists. Not long after receiving support from Creative Capital, Elahi was featured broadly in the media throughout 2007, including a stint on the Colbert Report.

At SITE Santa Fe, one installation of photographs is laid out in the abstract shape of the United States and features a slideshow of images from those regions of the country the screens are located. An orb in the floor is filled with flashing dots and lines that make up the movement of Elahi from one point to another. It seems both intimate and superficial to view a meal before someone consumes it and a toilet before defecating. The viewer becomes voyeur and the boundaries between reality and fiction blur.

Elahi’s art project takes the commodity of intelligence agencies, information, and makes it invaluable by flooding the market with data. By doing so, Elahi is free to have his own identity outside of pre-existing structures or systems. He may operate seemingly within those structures and systems by documenting and

providing so much information about his life, but the information becomes meaningless. Who cares what he ate today, yesterday or six months ago? Are we really interested in all the urinal images? And how do they relate to Duchamp? Somehow the pattern of thousands of urinals becomes art in a way that R. Mutt first explored with his "Fountain." Just as Duchamp de-deified the artist through his statement, Elahi is de-deifying the power of the FBI and their Cold War tactics. Through his software, not only does he post his whereabouts at all times, but he can trace and is aware of who is watching him. An excerpt from his log files: Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Courts, the Department of Justice, the State Department, Department of Homeland Security, House of Representatives, the Pentagon, National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, U.S. Joint Forces Command and EOP.gov a website that does not exist but stands for the Executive Office of the President.

"They still come consistently, even with Obama in office," Elahi said to a gathering for Cabinet magazine in Brooklyn on Jan. 13, 2010. "But not with the frequency when W. was in office. I'm just glad that people in Washington like to look at art."

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