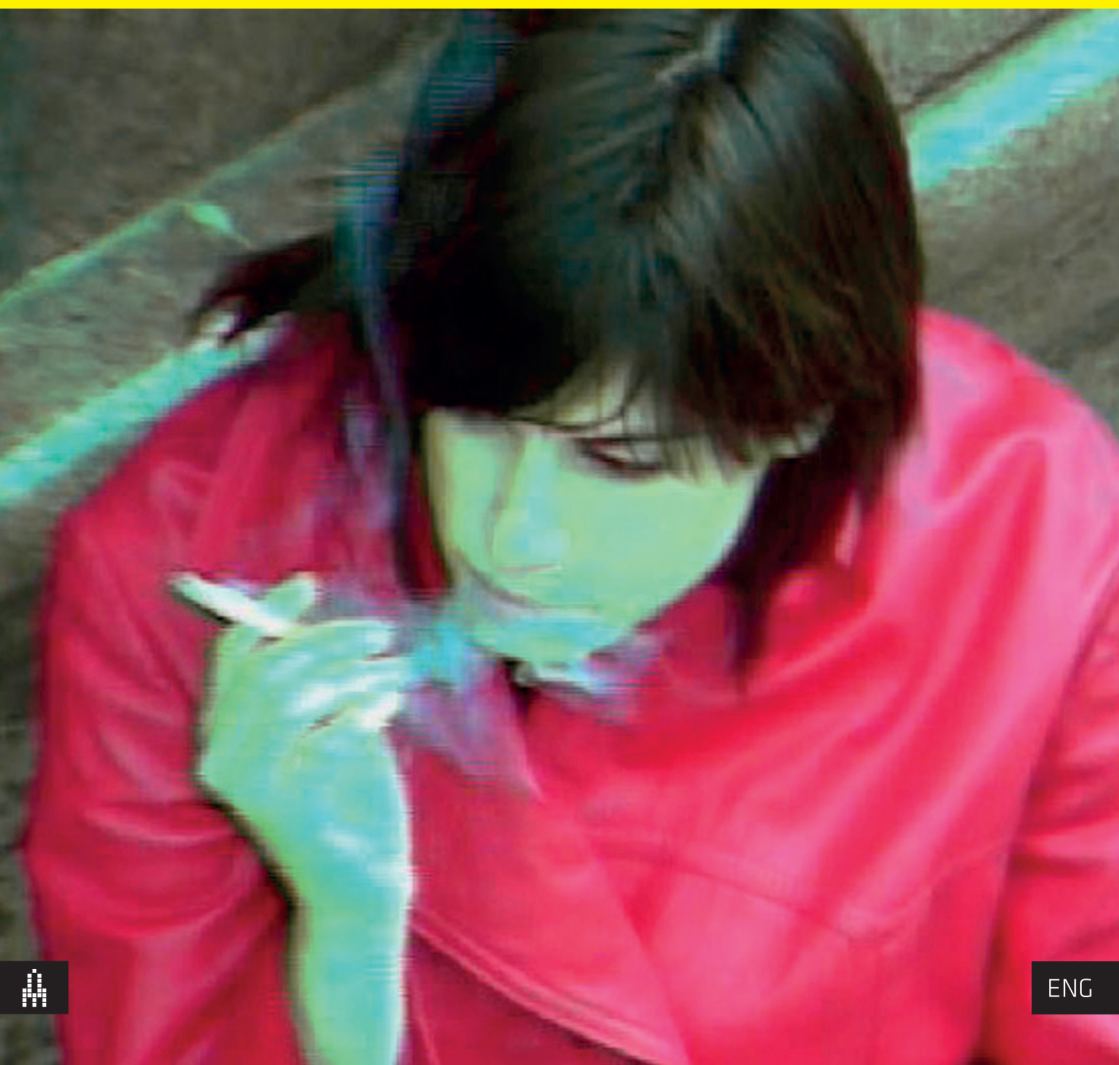


Domenico Quaranta

# DEAR OBSERVER



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*Dear Observer,*

*Make me a diary and keep it safe. Take care it is mine.*

*Hold this photograph of my face. Keep all our entries in order.*

*Put the letters in your desk file and the images in your evidence locker.*

*You can edit everyone else out.*

*I will fill in the gaps, the parts of my diary you are missing.*

*Since you can't follow me inside, I will record the inside for you.*

*I will mark the time carefully so you will never lose me.*

*Don't worry about finding me. I will help you. I will tell you what I was wearing, where I was, the time of day... If there was anything distinguishing about my look that day, I will make sure you know.*

*Hold onto my diary for at least seven years.*

*I am enclosing a cheque. Use it for whatever expenses you have.*

*Sincerely,*

*JSM*

On 29 January 2004, Jill Magid arrived in Liverpool, for a 31 day stay. Jill is an artist, and she had been invited to work on a project for the Liverpool Biennial that September. In Liverpool the City Police and City Council had just installed the City Watch System, the largest video surveillance system in the whole of Britain: 242 video cameras dotted around the city centre, a control station with a supervisor and six operators who monitor the city 24/7 on a video wall with 60 screens. The film shot each day is converted into a time-lapse video and stored on the station's computer for 31 days before being destroyed. During that time people can request to see the recordings by filling in a specific form, the "Subject Access Request Form", and paying £10. The material requested is stored in an "Evidence Locker" for at least seven years, while images under judicial scrutiny are archived in the "Jukebox", a digital storage unit in the police's Forensic Imaging Unit. The images stored there are kept forever. Jill Magid

already knew all this, after visiting the City Watch control station a few months before, in July 2003, and asking the supervisor to fill in a detailed questionnaire, something he readily did.

This is the framework for Jill's project and the Liverpool Biennial was the catalyst. But this is not a story about bureaucracy, surveillance and art. Rather it is a story of a meeting, a seduction and a love affair; a story in which love and seduction become tools for *knowing*: "The only way I know a thing is to touch it, and to let it touch me", Jill Magid has declared. The set-up in Liverpool establishes the terms within which Jill and the thing she wants to know can come into contact. They start to get to know one another when they first make that contact.

*I did not see you, but was not looking for you yet.*

*Thursday, January 29, 2004*

To get to this point, we have to forgo a lot of supplementary information, and turn the rest into characters and scenarios. Liverpool becomes the "city of L". Jill Magid the artist becomes simply Jill, the girl in the red trench. The "Subject Access Request Form", by means of which material is selected and stored in the Evidence Locker, becomes a love letter. City Watch becomes the Observer, or, simply You. Every day, for 31 days, Jill lives her life in L.: she gets up, has breakfast, goes to the gym, goes jogging, visits exhibitions, attends conferences and meetings, spends an evening with someone, smokes and makes phone calls. And every day, for 31 days, she writes a long letter to the Observer, detailing her movements, talking about her emotions, commenting on their meetings.

*This morning at 10am I left the house, walked up Rodney, and turned at Hardman Street. I saw you; you did not see me. Your back was turned.*

*Friday, January 30, 2004*

The narrative that forms around the relationship between Jill and the surveillance system of L. culminates in the humanisation of Observer. Each time Jill says or writes "you", she refers to a part of the system: a camera, a set of cameras, the control room, an operator, the supervisor. Sometimes we



Jill Magid  
*Evidence Locker (Trust)*, 2004

can make it out. As we read her letters and analyse the material stored in the Evidence Locker, the Observer begins to take shape, becoming a person. A person with whom Jill forges an intimate relationship built on glances, spoken and unspoken words, dates and let-downs, trust.

*I stood in the center of the street, in the red coat under my umbrella, and looked at you. I paused and looked right at you.*

*Saturday, January 31, 2004*

When she looks at a camera, Jill sees eyes. Once humanized, the Observer is no longer a disquieting – or reassuring, depending on how you feel about control – cybernetic organism; it is a person, someone we can relate to along familiar, atavistic dynamics. On 27 February, in her second-last letter, Jill finds herself having to reassure the Observer about the nature of their relationship, writing,

“I did not critique your system; I made love to it”. In *Evidence Locker* there is no criticism; there is a budding relationship, something new, especially for the Observer. Now a man and a lover, the Observer shows his vulnerable side.

*You marked a path on my map. I followed it. I got a tea at Café Nero and wrote a postcard. You watched me, from two angles, when I did this.  
Sunday, February 1, 2004*

This is where the power of *Evidence Locker* lies. The project has been described as belonging to a “new field of art and activism in which predictable forms of protest against the almighty eyes of power are turned into a dandy-like performance” (Geert Lovink); it has often been compared to the hippy strategy of responding to violence with gestures of peace (“we put flowers in your cannons”). But for Jill the Observer is not an omnipotent Big Brother or an enemy; it is an impersonal structure she sets out to seduce. “I seek intimate relationships with impersonal structures, and prepare for our seduction... Once seduced, a system moves from an exercise of power to a form of exchange.”

How long should I follow you? *Just as far as you want to.* I would follow you to the end of the world.  
*Monday, February 2, 2004*

The exchange takes place on an equal footing, and implies trust on both sides. By seducing the system, Jill makes it human and vulnerable. Like any lover, it is naked before her. But her seduction is not part of an attack strategy: this is an authentic love story. There is no faking or deception in her courting. If both parties are looking for something from this affair and find it, that something has nothing to do with their specific role or occupation, but is strictly personal.

*We fantasize about what we would be, if we were something else than you, an observer and me, a researcher.  
Saturday, February 7, 2004*

things get awkward. On 12 February Jill is attacked. Three young men on bikes crash into her and yank her bag. This incident is recorded, the men are arrested and Jill goes to the police station to give evidence. She is torn: she feels there is a dissociation between her experience and what the cameras filmed, that she is asked to confirm. The Observer has become a system once more, a system designed to protect civilians, the category Jill belongs to in that moment.

*I still need to show you Godard's Le Mépris since you have not seen it. I have selected parts of the film for you. Then you will know how to follow me like the camera follows her.*

*Saturday, February 7, 2004*

There is another awkward moment when, on 27 February, Jill meets the Observer and he questions her, worried, "about this artwork of yours." This question pulls them both back into their usual roles again – the critical artist and the system defending itself from criticism – and the situation has to be handled with great delicacy to get things back on an even keel.

Excluded from the story as an identity, art is an integral part of it as a narrative act. Once she has humanized the Observer, Jill asks him to work with her on a story in which they are both lead character and first person narrator. The story is their love story, the relationship that Jill experiences during her 31 day stay in the city of L. Jill portrays the Observer in her letters; the Observer depicts Jill in the material stored in the Evidence Locker. Like any love story, it takes shape day by day, an interplay of decisions, chance events, alternative perspectives, literary references and narrative devices.

*I liked you telling me how to move; it made me feel more confident, like I was not alone, or the idea was no longer only mine.*

*Tuesday, February 10, 2004*

*Since this morning I hate the wig and wish I could erase it.*

*Tuesday, February 10, 2004*

Photo: Janez Janša



Jill Magid  
*Evidence Locker*  
Aksioma | Project Space, Ljubljana, 2013







*I wanted a coffee and I wanted you to see me. Neither happened.  
Wednesday, February 11, 2004*

The story is jointly experienced and written, and their gradually developing intimacy is interspersed with moments of distance, mistakes and misunderstandings, little acts designed to elicit a specific reaction in the other. It is at once banal and extraordinary – but extraordinary in a way that is now increasingly inconspicuous: the sensations and emotions traced here for the first time characterise many contemporary love stories. In the age of smartphones and mediated communications, remote surveillance is now a component of most relationships. All lovers are potential Observers. We do not possess the 242 eyes of City Watch, but we have dozens of ways of keeping an eye on our partners. Applications keep track of their last access, and at any time we can check if they have read our last message; are online, and if and how they are handling other social interactions. We observe and are observed. We know when we are being watched, and this awareness conditions how relationships develop. But at the same time, remote communications remain basically obscure, and can have dramatic consequences if they intervene in a relationship that does not have a firm basis of trust. A prolonged silence can become an act of communication that generates doubts and raises questions, eliciting an emotional response. Why isn't he answering? He opened my message 10 minutes ago. Is he busy? Reception problems? Or...

*This place is anonymous; no one knows me; you watch me from above. I am your subject; I relate myself to the city by the way you frame me in it. I know when you see me and when you don't. You can't hear me or smell me or touch me. You know what I wear and where I go. When I pick up the phone, you don't know who is speaking to me, unless I am speaking to you. I like that.  
Thursday, February 12, 2004*

What remains extraordinary about Jill's story is that she does not restrict herself to loving *through* the device, she loves the device itself. And in doing so she understands that building trust is key, and looks straight into the camera. She puts herself out there...

*I will go there, you will come and meet me there, and I will close my eyes and you will hold me. I tell you to search my face. And my body. You want me to search your body? Yes, study me. It does not have to be invasive.*

*Friday, February 20, 2004*

... and abandons herself to the watching eye.

*We were connected, and it was invisible. I told you: I have an idea. I will close my eyes now, and you will walk me there like this.*

*Saturday, February 21, 2004*

In *Trust*, the video that documents this episode, which is both subtle and violent, she surrenders herself to the Observer's arms, and the latter acquires a voice, that is male, warm and reassuring. The process of humanisation is complete and now starts to get personal. Up till now the system, however human, has always manifested itself in plural form: "You" has variously been a man, a woman, a video camera. From that moment on You becomes that specific man: "You, You with a capital Y. You who walks for me. You who I trust completely", as she writes on 27 February. You is on camera himself.

*I want to be saved forever.*

*Tuesday, February 24, 2004*

Being in a relationship means writing a story, leaving a trace of one's presence. And writing a story means placing oneself in a more extended time frame. Standing out from the crowd. Becoming an individual, not one among many, and consigning oneself to a longer duration. According to Boris Groys, this is one of the functions of art and the museum: isolating a common object and attributing it a "difference beyond difference", making it last longer than it normally would. According to Jill, this is one of the functions of love: "Love depends on the ability to separate a someone out of the everyone." Or, as she writes to the Observer on 14 February: "I separate you and you separate me." Jill knows that her lover has a special ability to do this for her. 242 cameras are potentially the perfect film set for turning her life in L. into the "Jill Show"



Jill Magid  
*Evidence Locker (Final Tour)*, 2004

and recording every moment. But appearing before the Observer's gaze only guarantees her a duration of 31 days. Using the "Subject Access Request Form" to write the Observer love letters gets her into the Evidence Locker, to be stored in its memory for at least seven years. Getting a copy of the recordings to use in her work consigns her to the potential eternity that Groys talks about. Now part of the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of New York, *Evidence Locker* has accomplished this aim. By getting the Observer to store some of her images in the Jukebox, Jill has earned herself another kind of forever. "If you ever want to see them, they are in the Jukebox, forever, in a folder with my name, in a folder called February 2004. No rush. I'm permanent."

*Every time we passed the cameras we waved. And then you said, There is camera number 7. It's the last one we pass.*

*Saturday, February 28, 2004*



a love story always has something more to give. Jill's love story gives her the chance to take a motorbike ride round the streets of L. She is the passenger while the Observer rides, and together they wave at the surveillance cams before they leave the monitored area. For the first time, albeit temporarily, the Observer is separated from his incessant gaze and the system he embodies and represents. But there's more. This *Final Tour* continues to be recorded by the impersonal but friendly eyes of the cameras, and Jill's writing, informal in style but nevertheless destined to put the last day of her stay in L. into the Evidence Locker. Rather than showing him breaking out of his role, the Observer's escape appears to be a sign of his complete acceptance of the part Jill has asked him to play in her story: observer, lover, narrator, but in turn also a subject for study and observation.

You said, You know, when you sat on that bench I could have made love to you. *And I said, You did.*

*Saturday, February 28, 2004*

Domenico Quaranta  
DEAR OBSERVER

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***Evidence Locker***

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