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PRISMISM

**Emil McAvoy
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**www.enjoy.org.nz
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Futurist Painting for GCSB Boardroom (2012–13) is the first in a new series of tactical paintings entitled **PRISMISM**, which engage the charged political issues of security, privacy, democracy and human rights currently being debated in public spheres.

The painting's core motif is drawn from the blue and yellow livery of New Zealand Police highway patrol cars, but also references Italian Futurism's chequered history of promoting fascist ideology in their fetishisation of speed, power, and ultimately, war.

The Futurists' glorification of new technologies brought about by the rapid rise of industrialisation is evident in their iconic depictions of the automobile. The diagonal lines in the right section of the composition make reference to painter and sound artist Luigi Russolo's *Dynamism of an Automobile (1912–13)*, which also illustrates the Doppler Effect, where the sound frequency of a moving object changes relative to the position of the observer.

Futurist Painting for GCSB Boardroom is also intended to physically activate the observer, the irregular composition designed to elicit movement as the viewer attempts to reconcile the dis/connected sections. Further, the position and orientation of the canvas panels may be rearranged in order to present other iterations. This strategy was influenced by artist Sang Mun's encrypted typeface **ZXX** designed to evade the surveillance systems of the NSA's **PRISM** program, recently exposed by whistleblower Edward Snowden as secretly monitoring the communications of citizens worldwide on a vast scale:

<http://blogs.walkerart.org/design/2013/06/20/sang-mun-defiant-type-face-nsa-privacy/>

Critics of the new Government Communications Security Bureau Bill recently passed in New Zealand Parliament argue that the use of these new technologies act in contravention of New Zealand human rights and privacy laws, and that the acceleration of government communications surveillance signals the advance of a police state.

In this context our future as citizens is uncertain, with journalists, activists and artists particularly likely candidates for interception and oppression. In a recent public meeting to protest the Bill, internet entrepreneur Kim Dotcom remarked: "The new GCSB bill is like raising the speed limit after getting a speeding ticket. And it doesn't mean the GCSB won't be speeding again." [1]

[1]

Kim Dotcom, speech at Mount Albert War Memorial Hall, Auckland, 25 July 2013: <http://thedailyblog.co.nz/2013/07/25/live-video-stop-the-gcsb-bill-public-meeting-from-7pm/>

In the century since the Futurists, abstraction has been deployed to support a number of disparate political agendas. The **PRISMISM** series revisits the language and history of abstract painting, and tests its ability to remain relevant, critical and constructive.

Emil McAvoy

Auckland, New Zealand

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“The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life... Communism responds by politicising art.”

Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*¹

1

Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968): 253.

2

See Andrew Higgins, “Art and Politics in The Russian Revolution”, *Studio International* 927 (1970): 164.

3

For detailed accounts of the CIA’s involvement in the promotion of abstract art see Eva Cockroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War”, *Artforum* 15 (1974): 39-41, and also Frances Saunders, “Modern Art was CIA ‘Weapon’” *Independent*, October 22, 1995. Accessed May 25, 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html>

On the face of it, few things seem less political than abstract art. Veering away from overt representation, frequently reducing the world to form and colour, art of this kind often seems esoteric and aloof, coolly detached from social or political concerns. Yet over the past century, time and again, politics and abstraction have intersected. In the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, for example, Russian Constructivists saw abstraction as a new visual language for a new society, an art not for the avant-garde elite but for the largely-illiterate masses.² A few decades later, after Stalin had declared modern art to be a bourgeois anathema, the CIA stepped in, surreptitiously promoting the Abstract Expressionism of Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning and others as a marker of artistic freedom deemed only possible in the west.³ That the majority of the American public found such art incomprehensible, or that the artists themselves were unaware of this heavily-veiled patronage, seemed to matter little. As Walter Benjamin’s words remind us, art has been a hotly-valued asset at both ends of the political spectrum, and for the majority of the twentieth century it was abstract painting that occupied the penthouse of the avant-garde.

So how might Emil McAvoy’s *Futurist Painting for GCSB Boardroom* (2012–13) fit in to this tradition? A quick glance is all that’s needed to observe the painting’s inherently abstract aesthetic. Borrowing its dramatic colour scheme and striking geometry from New Zealand Police patrol vehicles, four canvases combine to form an eye-catching, dynamic tableau. It’s the sort

of piece you could imagine adorning the office of fictional 80s tycoon Gordon Gecko—a penthouse painting if ever there was one. Striking, dynamic, eye-catching: even on purely formal terms the image works, satisfying modernist demands for painting to present a flat, self-contained world.

Yet McAvoy’s piece makes demands of its own, refusing to yield to such a restrictive reading. As its playful title suggests, *Futurist Painting for GCSB Boardroom* is a work intended to carry a political charge. Reflecting the artist’s desire to engage in public debate about issues surrounding government surveillance, political power and the possible role art (and in particular, painting) might play in such discussions, *Futurist Painting for GCSB Boardroom* aims to agitate thought if not action. But there’s a conceptual charge to this work as well. In inviting us to imagine what such a boardroom might look like, the title immediately extends the scope of the work beyond the edge of its canvas—projecting us into the realm of imagination precisely because we’ll never get to look behind the ‘curtain’, to see the shrouded-in-secrecy boardroom for ourselves.

It’s a trick McAvoy pulls off here: making work embedded in contemporary issues but, by invoking a Futurist antecedent, also casting an eye to the history of art. In the process he traverses a hundred or so years while reminding us that perhaps both art and its history are, when they all boil down, simply politics by another means.

From an archive photograph declassified in 2012 to celebrate the 60th Anniversary of the NSA.

Caption: Members of the U.S. Army Signal Intelligence Service are seen here posing in front of their vault in 1935. The Signal Intelligence Service was renamed the Signal Security Agency in 1943. In 1945, it became the Army Security Agency. From left, H. Frank Bearce, Solomon Kullback, Army Capt. Harrod Miller, William Friedman, Abraham Sinkov, Coast Guard Lt. L.D. Jones, Frank Rowlett. Sitting: Louise Newkirk Nelson. Absent: John B. Hurt. (National Security Agency).

Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-innovations/a-history-.../3/06/19/ded58b8a-d823-11e2-a9f2-42ee3912ae0e_gallery.html#item5





**What do we think?
Guy Cohn and Henri Carlos**

Thought is central to politics.

It is unrealistic to think that real transformation cannot be thought.

History was all along thought against its unthinkability.

Thought remains a battlefield.

It is thought, given as the unthinkable, that we are made to fear.

The power of thought is to come to terms with what is said to be unthinkable.

The question of organisation is a question for thought.

Thought is central to politics.

Politics requires that people organise. This organisation can be reactionary and it can be confused. However, there are times when people will organise themselves in such a way that truth is revealed about the state of things. This kind of organisation can fundamentally transform the world.

People don't have to simply respond automatically to their situation; we have thought. Thought about what is, about how things have been framed and about what can be done to change things.

It is unrealistic to think that real transformation cannot be thought.

The idea that transformation of the world can be thought is dismissed as 'idealism' by today's champions of reality. Inevitably the cry against the thought of transformation will be 'you are being unrealistic.'

But this is an obscure, confused reality being championed: what is actually unrealistic is the notion that things can go on the way they are. What is actually unrealistic is the idea that we can not think real transformation; that real transformation is unthinkable.

History was all along thought against its unthinkability.

We should never underestimate the capacity for thought to lead people to seemingly 'unthinkable' change. History is filled with examples of people's shared capacity to transform the world against the confines of what is considered possible.

'Impossible' change is made possible by people naming the chance—the possibility—that it could take place. History is made up of the names given to those moments—those chances—in which seemingly 'unthinkable', 'impossible' change took place.

Thought remains a battlefield.

Today, more than ever, untold energy is spent defining the limits of what is possible. In the field of political thought and organisation, limits to what is 'possible' are deployed and policed left, right and centre.

These limits, distinguishing between what is possible and what is impossible, result from people's decisions and people's lack of decision. The world is metered in decisions, but mired in our failure to decide to define new possibilities and transform the given limits of any moment.

It is thought, given as the unthinkable, that we are made to fear.

In the policing of possibility we are regularly reminded of the horror of the 'unthinkable', the 'unspeakable', and the 'unimaginable'. Surveillance is justified by the fact that people think the unthinkable, speak the unspeakable and imagine the unimaginable.

So it is that surveillance has not been justified by the unthinkable, but by thought; not by the unspeakable, but by speech; not by the unimaginable, but by imagination. The fear of the unthinkable is in reality a fear of thought itself, and this—fear of thought—is what grounds the politics of surveillance.

The power of thought is to come to terms with what is said to be unthinkable.

The task of thought is to put the real, material world into terms which allow people to act within it: thought's task is to think what is not thought. The shape that thought takes—how it is developed, how it is shared, how it is remembered—defines people's decisions in the world.

Indeed, through thought the unthinkable itself can develop: today the thought of fascism continues to be acted upon, just as the thought behind the mass surveillance of today's capitalist democracies continues to pave the way for innumerable atrocities. In coming to terms with the presence of surveillance and fascism, and the thought that supports capitalist democracy, we must disprove the unthinkableability of the 'unthinkable'.

The question of organisation is a question for thought.

In organising politics, people take up the position of the unthinkable; people put into thought precisely that which the governing logic of our time seeks to suppress: thought that could lead to real transformation.

And so the question of organisation—how, when, where and what is to be done?—is a question for thought. Thought and organisation come together to reveal that the untold resources put into surveillance and control serve to suppress the fact that people are already thinking and organising to transform the world: that a new present is already here.

Just a few days later [after the uprising], with the blood of our fallen still fresh in the city streets, we realized that those from outside did not see us.

Accustomed to looking at the indigenous from above, they did not raise their eyes to look at us.

Accustomed to seeing us humiliated, their heart did not understand our dignified rebellion.

Their eyes were fixed on the only mestizo they saw with a balacava, that is to say, one they did not look at.

Our bosses told us then:

“They only see their own smallness, let’s make someone as small as them, so they may see him and through him they may see us.”

A complex maneuver of distraction began then, a terrible and marvellous magic trick, a malicious play of the indigenous heart that we are, the indigenous knowledge challenging modernity in one of its bastions: the media.

The character called “Marcos” started then to be built.¹

Techniques of the observed A polemic by Samuel Ó Var

1

“We All Must Become Zapatistas,” Chris Hedges, accessed June 23, 2014, http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/we_all_must_become_zapatistas_20140601/

Subcomandante Marcos, the spokesman for the Zapatistas (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or EZLN) describing how the character Marcos came to be built.

Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas took the paradoxical action of hiding their faces in order to be visible. As indigenous Indian South Americans they were perceived by the world outside their own as a generic group of human beings with no real agency. By hiding their faces behind balacavas they achieved a visibility which stemmed from becoming a threat to the observer.

They became a threat by identifying themselves as a collective. Each member of the group had equal agency or power to act. Each member was Subcomandante Marcos. In this way they not only made themselves visible but also destroyed the possibility of a vertical hierarchy. By hiding their individual identity, and acting collectively, they achieved a radical and rare democracy.

Hiding our identity may seem counter to concepts of the self operating today. In our present situation we must be seen to be making ourselves; it is crucial that an individual be visible. But where did this way of seeing ourselves come from?

During feudalism the primary observer of human beings was God. It was thought that God watched over everything. God was, however, only interested in our soul. Although we may be physically foul, if we had a good soul God considered us beautiful. It was our job to watch our spiritual self and to improve it for God.

Calvinists invented the personal diary to keep tabs on their spiritual progress, and believed there were indicators to show whether God approved of this progress. If God made you wealthy it was obviously the result of being a good Christian. By working hard and not fucking one’s neighbour one gained the approval of God and was rewarded with wealth, health and power. This belief is still ingrained in the present: today many reverse the rich as inherently better people. They are the wealth creators, they are good and intelligent, and they work hard.

But the rich don’t work hard for God any more. With capitalism came the death of God. Now we watch over each other. We are watching ourselves to check we are improving our human capital. We groom ourselves, because if we don’t we will be considered lesser human beings, and that means no job, lover, friends, or wealth. Spiritual grooming has given way to physical grooming, and the concept of ourselves as an exoskeleton with a private self within. As long as we look good on the outside we can keep an inside that only we know about.

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It is this inside that many feel is threatened by the surveillance we are enduring today. This inner self makes our real life decisions. This inner self plays the game, maneuvering us through life to get the best results. This inner self understands business and social mores and politics, and we have the right to keep this mechanism private. This privacy is necessary so that we can make decisions without others knowing, which gives us the freedom to choose without fear of others knowing our choice. This threat to our inner selves is, I believe, closely linked to another concept we hold dear, namely the concept of democracy.

Many people feel that electronic and other forms of surveillance are a threat to democracy, that our democratic freedom is being undermined by our every action being policed. Democracy and policing are worth examining in relation to our feelings about being watched. Jacques Rancière claims there are two kinds of politics today: the police operation of the so-called political, and its disruption by politics proper.² Politics proper is initiated by *dissensus*, where actors disrupt the politics of the police. The police here are not the boys and girls in blue, although they play their part.

Rancière shows how the police operation works to distribute a hierarchy of what is doable and sayable and what makes sense. Every time we come up against something which seems to be an edict that doesn't in itself do any good for the mass of the people, then it is the police operating.

Democracy as we understand it is a good example of how something that appears to be for our common good, is in fact the opposite. We are compelled by our current systems to vote for those who defend the rights and interests of capital over our interests as human beings and the good of the planet. To overcome this democracy we must confront the police with politics.

When we look closely at surveillance today, the real message we are given is that we need to hide. We are in the opposite position to Subcomandante Marcos. Because we are being spied upon we are constantly looking for ways to cover our tracks. Yet confronting the police here might mean doing the opposite. What if none of us hid from the police? We could instead say, "we are all the equal and you do not frighten us. Your surveillance is a sham".

The Zapatistas became visible by becoming a group subject. By hiding their individual identities they became visible as a collective because it was a group act. In counterpoint, as the subjects of intercepted digital communications surveillance we cannot mask our individual selves. We could instead realise we have nothing to hide, and nothing to hide from.

Emil McAvoy

Emil McAvoy (b. 1979) is an artist and writer based in Auckland, New Zealand. He graduated with a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Auckland in 2013, and has exhibited, screened and performed works across New Zealand. Recent projects include 'Reflections on Lily Pond', Projectspace, Elam School of Fine Arts (2014); a residency and open studio at Development AIR, Auckland (2013); and 'Occultivation', Snake Pit, Auckland (2012).

Henri Carlos and Guy Cohn

Henri Carlos and Guy Cohn are two figures of responsibility. In a world in which taking responsibility in any meaningful sense is obscured and policed, Carlos and Cohn present themselves as more than happy to take it. They insist on putting forward the necessity of an end to social relations dictated by capital, and to exposing the chances for the construction of a world beyond capitalist democracy. Their desire for forms of action, thought lost to the past, whether it be shutting down streets or holding universities captive, is not a nostalgia, but a beginning.

Matt Plummer

Matt Plummer is a freelance writer based in Wellington. His interests include art, music, politics and the digital humanities.

Comrade Samuel Ó Var

Comrade Samuel Ó Var (or in english Samuel O'Var) is filled with the sustaining heated force of nourishing ideology and the group dynamic. Comrade Samuel Ó Var agrees with Raoul Vaneigem in his 'The Revolution of Everyday Life,' when he says, "People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth." Comrade Samuel Ó Var is helping build from friendship and love in solidarity with others a world, which already exists, in which social relations are unfettered by the stinking chains of capital.