

The Image Collectors

~~~~~ *Samantha Wall and Stephen Slappe*

Figuring

In the midst of the vast, world-changing events of the past year, we have been reflecting on the nature of seeing, witnessing, and being seen—depths of transparency that are disappearing into maximum visibility, radically, right before our eyes. As artists invested in the aesthetic and philosophical texture of what is unseen, yet felt, and emergent, this troubling time has heightened our awareness and appreciation of presence. We know one another through and through.

Closeness now, means wild shifts of scale. During these long, strange months we have been experiencing the world through the dimensions of our computers and mobile devices. And just out our door, a map pin away, our bodies have adapted to new spatial patterns of relating to others. Experiencing life as a continuum of aspect ratios is second nature

to us as artists; but we never expected they would become parameters of life and death.

The amplification of the world's mediasphere has led us to deeper discussions about images, especially photographs, and how we use them. For both of us, the camera is a revelatory tool: stopping, slowing, and accelerating time, like a divining rod, extending our limited perception to reveal the elusive in plain sight. We have discovered rich interconnections and unexpected differences in how each of us collects images, experiences visual data, and translates that data into new images. For over twenty years we have studied the visible, and the invisible, together. We are image collectors—of the world, and one another.



*Figure 1.*  
Samantha Wall  
and Stephen  
Slappe (Photo:  
Sarah Meadows)

Figure 2.  
Samantha  
(Indivisible  
series), 2013.  
Graphite on  
paper, 22 × 30 in.



*Samantha Wall:*

Each of my drawings begins as a collection of digital photographs. I often rely on luck and quantity to amass a sizable pool of images, then carefully edit the collection down to a handful. I take hundreds of photographs in order to contend with the “flattening” that often occurs in portraiture. In many of my photographs, a subject that *I feel as a body*, might appear static and aware of the camera. In these instances, only likeness is communicated, transforming the photos into evidence. I’ve learned to quickly scan through my photos, touching each one with my eyes, until one returns my gaze. This reciprocity creates an affective bridge spanning time and space; it is a tenuous and arresting experience that tugs at my eyes. Roland Barthes called this invisible place photography’s “subtle beyond.” I experience it as a tension between the stillness

of the image and the vitality of the person represented. It is an ineffable quality that is immediately graspable and recognizable. I collect these photographs like talismans, siphoning their power and transmuting their “subtle beyond” within my drawings.

It was over thirteen years ago when I first experienced the full power of an embodied portrait, in the *Rembrandt and the Golden Age of Dutch Art* exhibition at the Portland Art Museum. I remember feeling ambivalent about Rembrandt before seeing the show; he was one of the “great men” whose work I had been educated to revere. In fact, the exhibition showcased some of the very paintings and drawings that were part of my indoctrination. What I wasn’t taught, of course, is that the art world is a hegemonic patriarchy, steeped in misogyny and racism. But in spite of this, I was eager to

experience the radiant magic of Rembrandt’s skill and knowledge.

I was approaching the entrance of the exhibition, when I caught a distant glimpse of one of Rembrandt’s famous self-portraits. I began to inch forward, reading, with my nose in the exhibition brochure. When I sensed I was nearing the entrance, I raised my eyes, and was immediately transfixed by the painting—it was gazing at me. I’d seen this work countless times in reproduction; it was Rembrandt’s 1661 *Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul*. But experiencing the painting in person, through my entire body, arrested me completely; it was as if time had been frozen by a spell, and I had fallen under its influence. For what felt like hours, the painting and I communed. It was a transformative experience that I could not explain at the time; but I measure all of my portraits against it to this day.

Five years later, I drew my first true portrait of a multiracial woman, for what would become the ongoing series *Indivisible*. I felt a profound urgency to make drawings of women whose experiences I could relate to: portraits that confirmed my social existence. For too long, I had been caught in a deep ontological chasm,

For too long, I had been caught in a deep ontological chasm, struggling with the invisibility of my transcultural identity.

Figure 3.  
Sigourney  
(Indivisible  
series), 2013.  
Graphite on  
paper, 30 × 22 in.

Figuring



Figure 4.  
*Chrissi* (*Indivisible*  
series), 2013.  
Graphite on  
paper, 30 × 22 in.



Figure 5.  
*Amelia IV*, 2016.  
Graphite on acetate,  
29 x 21 in.



struggling with the invisibility of my transcultural identity. The feelings of fragmentation that I had ignored for years, left me with a body I couldn't see or reconcile. Drawing, and engaging in conversations with other multiracial, multiethnic individuals, offered me a path toward integration and self-acceptance. The portraits in *Indivisible* depict women determined to protect their identities from being disassembled and compartmentalized by cultural bias and racism. Developing *Indivisible* evolved a new branch of my practice; and during this time, I had a strange and critical revelation—there was a stark difference in the portraits I drew of people I was close to, or loved.

There was genuine fullness and subtlety in my portraits of friends and family that was absent in my other drawings. As I probed the intuitive aspects of my practice for answers, I discovered that my work had been influenced by a desire and need for presence and true connection, long before I began making portraits. Whether this was the result of innate or learned behaviors, still remains unclear to me; however, my obsession to see and be seen by others, closely, tactilely, through touch, has never waned. I study faces: the shapes of a person's eyes; the

structure of their cheekbones; the length and fullness of their lips; the width of their noses; and the many spaces in-between. I feel myself falling into each face, and recording its affect in turn.

We don't spend time gazing into the faces of others, unless they are our intimates. Even during close conversations, we make some initial eye contact, and then divert our gaze—rarely do we study one another. Is it out of fear we turn away? That we may reveal our unbridled desires? We share our true selves in slivers of seconds, unconsciously, through all the senses. This closeness summons sacred forms of interiority. I seek these places and moments, discreetly, in the faces of strangers. I linger like a lover over the subjects of my photographs. The loyalty I feel is not to likeness, but to the freedom and intensity of embodiment.

*Stephen Slappe:*

I'm a collector and a sifter first and foremost. All of my work begins with gathering—images, sounds, and objects—guided by an evolving set of social and political concerns. Collecting and sorting materials requires that I place my trust in their capacity to communicate with me, as I invest in their magic to lead the way. My archives include original and found photographs, screenshots, videotapes, films, etc. As I sort, I do not know what I am seeing exactly, or what I am searching for; and I cannot predict what will emerge. What I know, is that something palpable and electric grows between me and my material—a tender membrane, a creative and intellectual flypaper. I build my collections through both intentional and random acts: making videos; plucking physical media from flea markets and second-hand bins; and building digital image-banks from the residue of years of internet and social-media access.

Through the gradual process of amassing these audiovisual collections, I begin to see patterns of social behavior and environmental, and cultural, organization: visual ideologies, perhaps. Slowly, a space opens—a blur between

the representations we leave behind, and the invisible folds of who we are. But I'm more of a poet than a social scientist; I'm free to muse through my sensorium, editing and recombining, and selecting material to transform into other things. I've created: video installations; printed books; and fine-art prints, to name a few. This is where my solitude becomes most recognizable to others as works of art. Over the years, my practice has shifted from analyzing television news footage, to satirizing television and film tropes, to examining the influence of social media and mobile devices on our everyday experience. I'm collecting, dismantling, and rebuilding images, hoping to learn their structures and meanings.

In 2015, I created a four-channel video installation (and series of photographs) entitled *Our Peace*. The project grew from an archive of photographs and video footage recorded in neighborhood in Southeast Portland. For a few years after getting my first good digital camera, I carried it constantly, recording anything that caught my eye.

During the same period, while teaching video at Pacific Northwest College of Art, I had the remarkable opportunity to bring

a group of women filmmakers from Iraq, to present their work and engage with my students. In one film, my students and I noticed the U.S. military in the background of literally every intimate conversation (this is mostly ignored by the characters). We watched dust from a low flying helicopter swirling around a quarreling couple, and a line of Humvees barreling down a street behind two women chatting at the market. Through a State Department translator, I was able to speak with an actress from the film. I expressed my appreciation for the bravery and integrity required to “perform” the occupation through the lens of the banal. “It didn’t look like I expected,” I told her. She gazed at me intensely, and said, through the translator: “Ten years. For ten years this is what our life is like every day. Until I met you and your students today, I thought all Americans were dogs.”

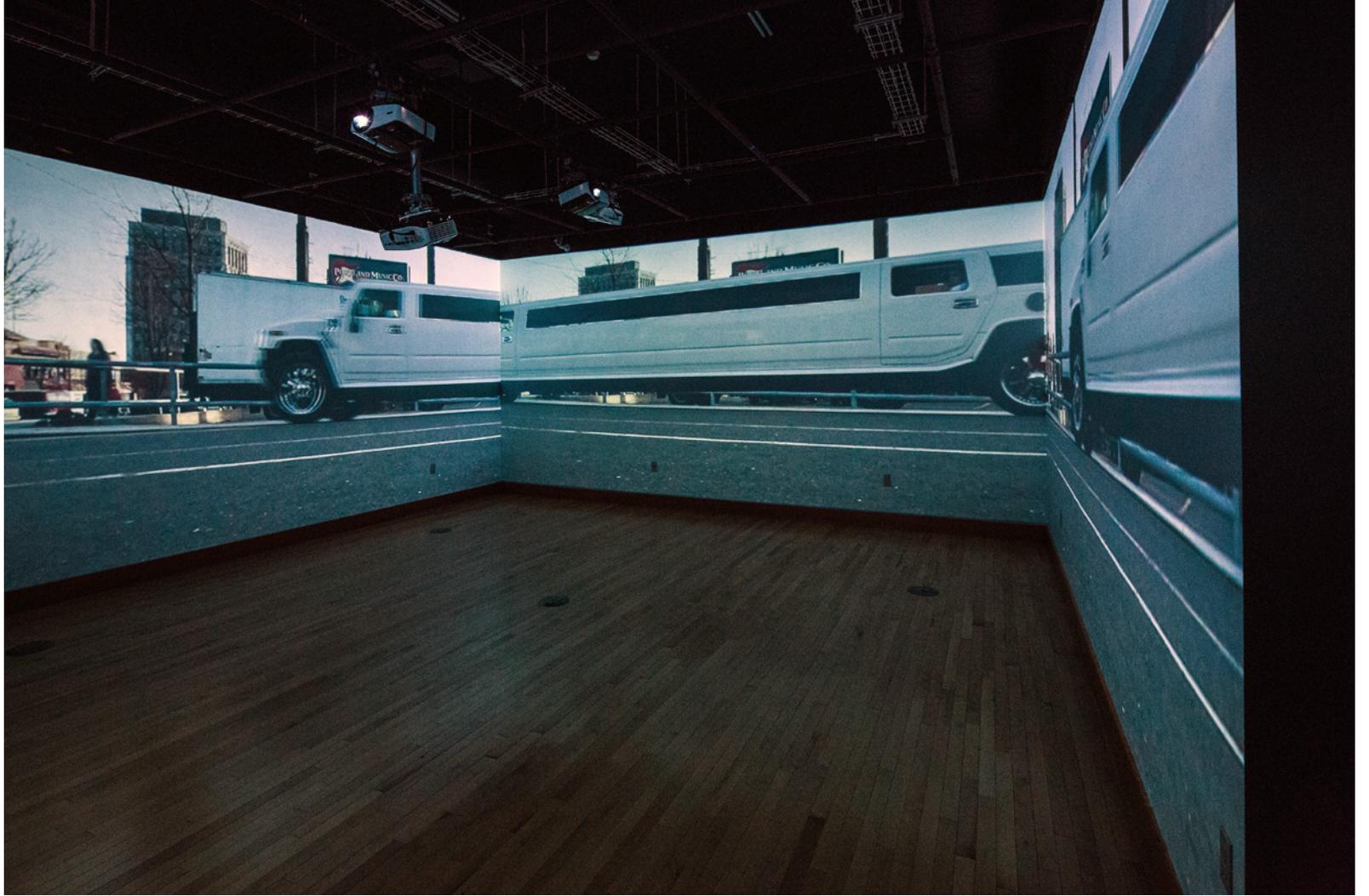
Not long afterward, while checking a folder of videos I recorded around Portland, I observed a pattern in my footage that spoke to the visual language of occupation here at home. I noticed how machines of war had been woven, incrementally, into our social fabric—transformed into comical Humvee limousines,



Figure 6.  
*Our Peace*, 2015.  
Video installation, dimensions  
variable

Figure 7.  
*Our Peace*, 2015.  
Video installation, dimensions  
variable





*Figure 8.*  
*Our Peace*, 2015.  
Video installation, dimensions  
variable

commercial jets, and clumsy bombdefusing robots. The recent protests in Portland made it very clear how many military weapons have been integrated into police departments across the country. We saw these weapons in Portland, and understood their purpose, amplified by an occupation of unwanted federal agents, assaulting, instead of protecting, our residents.

The main footage in *Our Peace* was captured in front of our old apartment. I witnessed and recorded four hours of a bomb-squad robot methodically tearing apart a 1960's Volkswagen Beetle. There's a long story as to why the car was considered dangerous, but trust me when I say, the police response was overkill. I couldn't have invented a more salient metaphor to describe our present moment. Here was the cute little VW, designed by the Nazis, which traveled to the United States and became an icon of free-love counterculture. Now, post-9/11, it symbolized anti-patriotic anarchy and radicalism. As I filmed, I watched the Beetle, slowly ripped and peeled like an orange, by the clumsy bomb-machine, controlled by overzealous agents.

Samantha Wall, originally from Seoul, South Korea, is an artist working in Portland, Oregon. Wall immigrated to the United States as a child and comes from a multiracial background. Operating from within this framework, her drawings embody the experience of navigating transcultural identity. Her projects have been exhibited at the Hangaram Art Museum in the Seoul Arts Center, CUE Art Foundation in New York, and Portland Art Museum, as well as exhibition spaces in New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Frankfurt. She is the recipient of numerous grants and awards including an MFA Grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation, a Golden Spot Residency Award at Crow's Shadow Institute for the Arts, and the Arlene Schnitzer Prize at Portland Art Museum.

Stephen Slappe (b. Charleston, WV) is an artist based in Portland, Oregon. Slappe's work has exhibited and screened internationally at the Karachi Biennale, Transart Triennale (Berlin), Centre Pompidou-Metz, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's TBA Festival, The Horse Hospital (London), The Sarai Media Lab (New Delhi), and Artists Television Access (San Francisco). His work has been funded by multiple grants from the Regional Arts and Culture Council of Portland and an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Oregon Arts Commission. His most recent project is Willamette Line, a permanent video installation inside the 5MLK Building in Portland, Oregon that can be viewed from the sidewalk on the East Side of the Burnside Bridge.

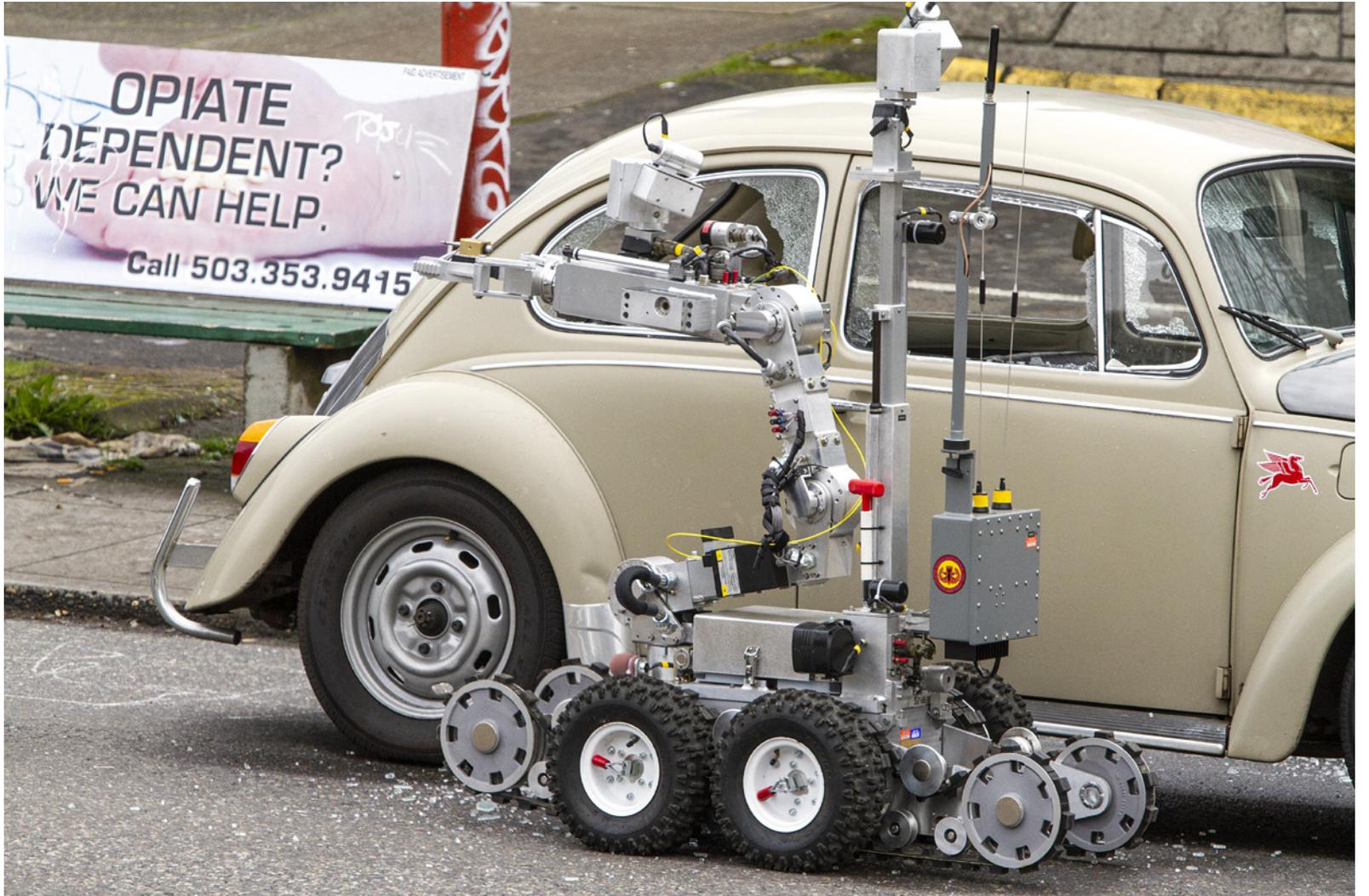


Figure 9.  
Our Peace, 2015.  
Video installation, dimensions  
variable