Tracking Himself: The 'Orwell Project'

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Soon after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. government mistook Hasan Elahi for a terrorist. On a return trip from Europe, the Bangladesh-born, New York-raised artist was flagged at the airport and interrogated. To prove his whereabouts, Elahi showed them his Palm PDA, a device that yielded enough information -- from calendar notes of appointments and classes he teaches at Rutgers University -- to placate his interrogators.

But shaking off the feds would not be easy. In the months after the first round of questioning, the FBI subjected Elahi to more interviews and to a lie-detector test. Though he passed the test, his paranoia grew.

The artist hatched a plan. If Big Brother wanted proof of his coordinates, why not surveil himself? Recording his own moves could, theoretically, seal his alibi.

And, when conceived of as art project, the action might satirize federal intelligence gathering.

From the day in 2002 when Elahi implanted a GPS-enabled device in his cellphone, art and life merged. Several times a day, the artist input his location into the phone and his computer recorded the data (he hopes to incorporate a live GPS tracker soon). He then created a Web site that allowed viewers to see where he is at any given time -- you can visit at http://www.trackingtransience.net-- and he began taking photographs with a digital camera as further proof of his whereabouts.
A documentary exhibition, "Tracking Transience: The Orwell Project," on view at Civilian Art Projects, grew from Elahi's promising scheme.

But as an exhibition, "Tracking Transience" loses its way. Elahi's premise is based on real-life evidence and the obsessive recording of events. In this area, his exhibition succeeds. He foists plenty of visual information on us, including grids and panels of photographs taken at airports and on aircraft, site plans of various airport terminals and videos based on his travels.

Yet precious few of the images here are presented with time or date stamps or any identifying information. It's as if the element of corroboration has gone missing. Even the artworks that show satellite coordinates -- a video screen flashes one satellite image per day for a year, showing where the artist was at noon each day -- invite doubt. The year isn't listed, only the month and day -- May 1, May 2, etc. How are we to know when Elahi was where he said he was? Or if it was indeed the artist's phone that registered these coordinates?

The questionable authenticity of images is as old as the history of photography. The digital age invites further doubt. But there's something missing here -- a strand of evidence that establishes the artist as a voice of authority, if only mock authority. As it stands, doubts hang at every turn.

The trouble comes in the grids of photos on view, shot inside airports and on airplanes to prove the artist's presence at the time he claims to have been there. Yet one particularly arresting grid of color photos depicting in-flight meals is arranged not in accordance with a particular chain of events or itinerary. Instead, as the artist told me, the photos fit together simply because they looked good.

Yes, the colors pop and the images' regularity and repetition captivate. Making aesthetically minded choices is any artist's prerogative. But here, in a show dedicated to documentation, such a choice runs counter to the larger project. "Tracking Transience" is about establishing a veneer of confidence and it loses us when it wavers.

Another photo grid, called "Interstate," assembles pictures of airports the artist has visited. For this piece, Elahi input parameters into his computer to select the pictures -- a certain span of time, airports where he'd spent a minimum number of hours, etc. Such choices establish a relationship between the images. Yet even these moves aren't apparent without asking the artist himself.

Other pictures show urinals, food courts and other airport sights. Each image prompts questions: What day? Which airport? Which moving walkway? To his credit, Elahi cross-references his data with records kept by people other than himself -- bank transactions, credit card swipes and cellphone call data. Yet none of that information is on display in the gallery. Without real-life documentation corroborating the artist's truth, "Tracking Transience" becomes an exercise in solipsism.

Young Chinese Photographers At Addison/Ripley
A lot of art has emerged from China in the past few years, much of it very bad. It might as well be 1985 all over again, what with the proliferation of large-scale works by a handful of anointed stars selling for big, big bucks. Witness the epic jump in price at auction: In 2004, Sotheby's and Christie's combined sold $22 million in Asian contemporary art. Two years later, they sold 1½ times that.

Washington hasn't felt the boom. A Federal Reserve Board show last year brought some Chinese art stars to town, confirming that price doesn't equal quality. At Addison/Ripley, three young Beijing-based photographers represent the more moderate end of the spectrum. Their prices range from a modest $6,000 to a demure $1,800, in part because photography is always cheaper than painting. Chosen with the help of a Beijing-based curator, the works on view represent three distinct styles -- landscape, surrealism and documentary-style social critique.

But this show isn't about the art. It's about how art is marketed. Remember that, aside from a few exceptional expatriates, Chinese contemporary artists haven't been readily accessible to us. For these three artists there are likely 300 or 3,000 more awaiting a big break. What makes these artists better than their peers? Art, like money, is a confidence game. Belief in the gallery that's backing them and trust in the curator that chose them are as important -- if not more so -- than their skills.

Tracking Transience: The Orwell Project at Civilian Art Projects, 406 Seventh St. NW. Wednesday-Saturday noon-6 p.m., to June 9. Call 202-607-3804 or visit http://www.civilianartprojects.com.

Three at Addison/Ripley Fine Art, 1670 Wisconsin Ave. NW, Tuesday-Saturday 11 a.m.-6 p.m., to May 19. Call 202-338-2341 or visit http://www.addisonripleyfineart.com.