Heba Amin: I think I saw your work *Evidence Locker* the first time in 2007, that’s when you had the show at the Gagosian Gallery. And it occurred to me, when I was going back through my notes, that was 10 years ago already. I’ve been thinking about this project and how certain elements are now drastically different, the landscape of the technologies of surveillance have changed. But the thing that really stood out to me is the language of intimacy you created around these very dry and bureaucratic structures; when I read through your novella, it really stayed with me for a long time, so much so that I was thinking about it when I started my own project ten years later.

In 2014 I took a trip in West Africa, starting in Nigeria and traveling to Europe by road; the project was about borders and migration. But I found the topic very difficult to grapple with and asked myself: who am I to tell this story with these harrowing narratives of people who are experiencing something that I could never begin to understand? When I decided to embark on the journey I first needed to get all my travel documents in order. I’m an Egyptian citizen and I have an Egyptian passport, which basically means I’m relatively immobile, I need to get a visa for every single country that I travel to, and that has to be arranged beforehand. I had to make appointments with all the consulates and attend the interviews (a process that took several months because I had to apply for 12 visas) and there was a consistent dynamic that I was confronted with. The consulate officers were often very flirty with me and, with all my data in hand, were establishing this very uncomfortable and awkward interaction that made me so aware of my lack of agency. This is where I started thinking about your project. It was this idea of “intimacy” in bureaucracy and a questioning around how one could reclaim power in that particular space by flipping the narrative. One of the main questions I have for you and the way you approached your project *Evidence Locker* is regarding whether or not you found that you managed to claim your power in that system by setting up the conditions yourself.

Jill Magid: Yes absolutely. *Evidence Locker* took place in Liverpool which had, at the time, the largest CCTV [closed circuit television] program of its kind. It was run by the Liverpool police and city council. I was then, and am still, interested in the idea of the omniscient eye of the State and its various manifestations. In this case, it was the bird’s-eye view (and the recording capabilities) of those CCTV cameras. The more I researched the system, the more I questioned the lack of agency of the citizen caught on camera. These cameras create a space of performance; their range of vision produces a platform. You typically pass through it, knowingly or unknowingly. It’s not a dialogic relationship. You are being watched. Or, most likely, you are not being watched; you’re only being recorded. I wondered if there was a way to use the system differently, to look back at it and engage it. That possibility was designed into the system, although no one else had previously used it. If a citizen fills out the proper legal forms—saying who you are, where you were, the time of day and the “incident” that happened—which was not defined, and paid the appropriate fee, the police, by law, had to show you the footage they had of you. I filled out the documents every day for 31 days like letters to a lover. The operators responded by following me closely, eventually giving me access to their control room and themselves. I think this engagement with the system created more than a simple inversion of it. It altered its function. The system became an apparatus, like a film studio, through which I created a diary of my existence in the city.
vehicle through which to create a relationship with the operators—the policemen—who were otherwise faceless and hidden.

HA: Do you feel like you felt empowered by being in that position of now being able to dictate how that system works for you, as opposed to being the passive victim of it?

JM: Yes. I felt empowered, among many other feelings, but I wouldn’t have called myself a victim. Granted I’m a white female, so in Liverpool I was very probably not a targeted person. As a woman, though, I was somewhat targeted, or treated differently. For instance, I made an 18‐minute video work with the footage called *Trust*. In it, one of the CCTV officers is leading me through the city via the cameras with my eyes closed. He becomes my eyes. It was very intimate. At the end of it, I open my eyes and we say goodbye to each other. My performance is over, I walk off camera, but the camera, of course, remains on. There is this amazing change when the officer is no longer looking through it. You can feel the camera die, or become disembodied, even though it is still running. Right before the footage cuts out, this tall woman with a tight sweater enters the frame. She’s about to go off-camera, when suddenly one of the officers must have seen her and quickly picked up the controlling device and started following her. She unwittingly becomes the object of the gaze through the camera, just moments after our intimate use of it. It’s a disturbing moment—whether you want to give that woman the name “victim”, I am not sure, but she absolutely becomes a subject that is not in control of her own subjectivity.

HA: I suppose “victim” is maybe too direct of a word. It’s very difficult now to get away from the implications that surveillance has. I feel today it has a very different meaning in the post-Edward Snowden landscape. Surveillance footage often has this very specific connotation, and I think what’s really interesting about your films is you manage to make them playful. It’s really funny at times, and a joy to watch you try to navigate the space with your eyes closed. It’s really funny at times, and a joy to watch you try to navigate the space with your eyes closed. You’re walking in the wrong direction, then you’re going to walk into people... it really takes you away from the experience of the violence of surveillance, something I couldn’t achieve in my own work. I couldn’t find a way to lighten the subject matter, I couldn’t find a way to get away from the violence that’s inherent in the tools that I’m using. This is why I then decided to put myself in the position of the voyeur to understand what it feels like so that I can better conceptualize it. In the case of my project I am very specifically addressing vulnerable bodies and difficult political situations, and I felt that the only way I could deal with the surveillance was to go behind these surveillance tools myself. I found that I was even more disturbed than I thought I would be. I’m wondering in your case—because you say that you’ve had conversations hanging out with some of these surveillance officers and you plotted movie scenes together and stuff like that—how complicated their side of it really was as you indicated. You said that they were also uncomfortable. How did they elaborate on that? I’m very curious.

JM: I found, early on into the 31-day cycle of the project, that half the officers on that system questioned or were uncomfortable with their newfound gaze. Before being CCTV operators, most if not all of them worked as cops on the streets. They encountered people directly with all their senses, not from a distant, concealed position. They spoke of often misinterpreting people’s actions and feeling confused by this. But just to comment on what you just said about the fact that you felt you couldn’t escape certain things, from what I understand when you were getting the visas, you were sitting across from the officers. There was no mediating device.

HA: Right, yes. To an extent.

JM: It’s a big difference from my relationship with the officers, which was mediated by the cameras. There are different levels of complication once the surveillance device...
is removed. We are also talking about, in your case, an extremely different context. I’d done a lot of research on the surveillance apparatus, and what I often found was that there was a lot of information about how the technology worked but little about the people who were to operate it. There was even less information about what exactly they were looking for, or why they were looking for it in this way. I think perhaps the officers felt that. Initially, the officers were confused by my way of approaching the system, saying things like: I am not sure if I am supposed to film you this way or show you the footage. Or why do you want this? I’d continually refer to the system handbook or the law, both publicly accessible. I could provide a good reason why they should continue following me. I was often met with startled looks. Eventually there was a certain moment when they stopped questioning me. Half of the officers in the control room never really participated but a good number did, and at a certain point when we were deep in, we all knew it was getting really weird, and everyone seemed to know that if anyone called it out, it would end. It was kind of this unspoken thing, a complicity, that we came to share. This process is what I refer to as a seduction, which I mean in a Baudrillardian sense. A kind of gaming between players.

HA: I suppose I confront that in a very real way as well because of my experience with getting the visas and the fact that I was being hit on. One consulate officer took extra photos of me and taped it on his computer, another pursued me online and asked me out on a date, he has all my data. And another invited me to a marriage seminar because I’m in my 30s and I’m single. You know things like that made me wonder what it’s going to be like actually crossing the border. And it made me really uncomfortable with this idea of intimacy that’s embedded in bureaucracy, that crossing a border becomes this intimate act of granting entrance. There’s something horrific about that.

JM: I wouldn’t use the word “intimate”. I think that with the police officers, I found a space of intimacy via the apparatus; the relationship afforded by the cameras became something other, something more than surveillance or counter-surveillance. In the case you are describing, I think those power dynamics—of their authority over your (potential) access—remained intact. I wonder if they behave like that with all women or if they were like that with you in particular because you are young and attractive. I also wonder what your behavior was, like when you went in and they started being flirtatious, did you roll it right away? Or were you kind of experimenting to see how far these authorities would abuse their power? What was your experience in that position?

HA: Of course, initially it wasn’t something I was egging on. And, sure, perhaps there’s something in my demeanor that encourages a certain interaction. But when I noticed it being consistent I started to document it during the actual trip. At the border-crossings I started secretly recording the interactions with border patrol officers to get a better understanding of these hierarchies, especially since the spaces I was traveling in are male-dominated spaces. There are predominantly young men travelling on the migration routes and so I was always outnumbered. I was investigating my own discomfort in spaces that I felt I wasn’t supposed to be in and, perhaps through that, exaggerated my behavior.

JM: See, I think the idea of highlighting what is already there is really interesting. When I first started showing Evidence Locker and giving artists talks about the project, there was inevitably someone in the audience, always male, who would jump up and say: Do you think the police would have followed you if you were a man? It was always said as if it was happening to me and I would respond: No. I don’t think they would have followed me if I was a man. And I’d add, there wasn’t a single female officer on that team. I used this quality of the system to explore it: I wrote the legal documents to access footage as love letters, I stared into the camera, and performed for it. I tapped into the system, aware of the one-way gaze of the surveillance cameras, and who was behind them. I don’t think it’s possible to exaggerate something that isn’t already there. You can’t go and drop something foreign into a system because it simply won’t be legible to it. So, I can imagine—and I want to make very sure that it didn’t seem like I was saying that because you are young and attractive that you are eliciting bad behavior from those officers, or that you are responsible for it—and yet I can imagine they did indeed behave like this. Unfortunately, this is not an unfamiliar dynamic for women in facing male authorities. How then can you respond? Do you attempt to shut it down if you could? Do you risk not getting the visa? Do you ignore it? Or do you study the behavior, which seems to me is what you were doing, and inform your project. It seems like it was a way for you to study these roles, and how they made you feel. But I don’t find it intimate because you’re still being fully objectified; there’s no agency or subjecthood really happening there.

HA: I suppose a better word would be “sexualized” or “objectified” as opposed to “intimate”.

JM: Yes.

HA: I mean from that point I felt like I needed to understand what that gaze feels like; this is where I tried to flip the narrative by becoming the voyeur myself. When I traveled this journey, I used a theodolite which is an engineer’s tool but it’s also a telescopic device that I was using to photograph. It was a very eerie feeling, I felt guilty about it, because I suddenly became the spy watching people who had no idea I was anywhere in the vicinity. This is also where I was thinking about how CCTV cameras are set up, that you can watch people and they have no idea that you’re watching them. But the thing that is even more disturbing about the tool that I chose to use, in addition to its problematic history embedded within colonialism and construction in Africa, is that it also has crosshairs on it. Suddenly I felt like I was setting myself up to act upon the violence and that made me very uncomfortable. I don’t know whether that gave me further understanding of what
it’s like to be in that position of power or not. It raises this question about my position in this whole thing. I felt like what I was doing was quite problematic, and in a way, I couldn’t fully come to grips with it. I wondered about that also in your case. I thought a lot about these interior spaces that you were going into and then describing at length in a—one could say here—intimate way. I feel like surveillance is now in those intimate spaces, the differentiation between interior / exterior space is no longer distinct. I wonder how you would think about that differently now than you did then.

JM: Surveillance technology and the awareness of it has changed for sure, but I don’t know if police-operated city-wide CCTV is run vastly differently than it was then. Those cameras aren’t generally inside of domestic space; that’s still illegal, I believe. I could be wrong. I think working with CCTV the way I did, when I did, encompassed a different set of dynamics from what you were facing with the visa officers, and with what you were doing with the theodolite. With the theodolite, you imported your own, autonomous system into the migration path. I was looking into your work before speaking with you, and I was thinking about these devices. It’s an old tool, but they still use them to survey the landscape, right?

HA: Yeah, yeah, they do. Just more updated versions.

JM: I’m always really interested when I see people using those because it’s often in the middle of a busy, city street as if the world is a map and they’re just standing on it and no cars are coming because they’re in the act of surveying. I guess one could argue it’s a form of surveillance but it has a different use, right?

HA: Definitely. I guess it’s not necessarily the surveillance of that system that I’m thinking of.

JM: No, no I didn’t think you were. What I found interesting was how you used the device to measure the land, and as a measure of yourself in that landscape. Obviously, we are aware there’s a whole long critique and study on the use of maps and their relationship to politics, power, and control. In a talk that you gave that I listened to online you were talking about somebody who said that the way a map is formed is an illustration of who is in power at the time of its making. Or something to that degree.

HA: Definitely contemplating my position in that space is a really important part of it. What am I doing there? The initial question that I was troubled by was: why am I doing this? I had to find my place in it. I inserted myself through histories that I felt I could position myself in. I was using an Arabic geography text, the first comprehensive description of the geography of West Africa under the Islamic Empire in the 11th century. But what’s really interesting about this text is that merchants and travelers and traders are describing the places that they encounter through sexually explicit descriptions of women’s bodies, a scientific text which is an objectification of women. That’s the part that I became interested in, a narrative that I could engage with. But I also wanted to bring to light somehow the contemporary context of these very troubling and problematic contested spaces. For me, my position in this project was such a burden and I was so aware of it. When I watch your video Trust, I wonder how aware you are of your own body in that space and how comfortable or uncomfortable you felt doing that.

JM: I think it’s really great that you felt uncomfortable with what you were doing, and grappled with your position, because they’re very important questions. I felt this at times when I made Evidence Locker, too. The cameras were supposedly meant to fight crime, not to make a visual diary. I continue to face these questions in current projects, as do many other artists and writers I speak with, especially now in the Trump era: Who can tell which story? When you enter a foreign space to experience it, what kind of experience are you having and how can you communicate it? These are some of the questions of our moment. I think one has to be very conscious of his or her own position in each context. To be aware of oneself and to exhibit, or state, this awareness.

HA: I think about how narratives in the media are perpetuated. There are power structures at play, dictating other people’s stories. Interestingly, this is something that we seemingly don’t question in the same way. How does one negate that narrative as well? In fact, this was one of the main motivations for this journey to begin with: to diversify the contemporary migration narrative as told in the media.

JM: Yes, there need to be more voices, and different voices. It’s so delicate because I really don’t like the idea that only certain individuals qualify to speak. That’s a dangerous position because how’s anyone going to ever come to understand anyone else? When you reached out to me, I wanted to be mindful that questions I asked came from an informed place because I have not traveled through many of these countries that you have in your project. I have not walked this migration path; I have not been personally involved in the