

Statement on the Aims of the Research Stay

I am writing to request a research stay as a visitor scholar at the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies (ZtG) for four months, from January to the end of April 2019. My goal during this time is to complete work on a book project entitled “Desire Lines: Intimacy and Antagonism as Institution Critique,” which examines four contemporary artists working within surveillance environments. At the ZtG, I would look forward to participating in a transdisciplinary community of scholars devoted to issues of gender, whose research interests intersect productively with my own. I know that I would have much to gain and much to contribute to an environment in which the rigours of Gender Studies are sustained in a spirit of generosity, respect, and collective learning.

I am traveling to Berlin with financing from my own institution, Vanier College, in Montreal. My request, then, is for a workspace at the ZtG, access to the library and electronic resources, and the privilege of participating in various events, colloquia, and discussions, including the international conference on Care and Migration at the end of January. I would also welcome the opportunity to present my research to other members of the community, should the possibility arise.

Description of the Project

My research project examines four contemporary artists working with surveillance environments. The environments chosen by Jill Magid, Taryn Simon, Sable Elyse Smith, and Hajra Waheed – prisons, airports, public streets – are in each case transformed by an artistic intervention: what appear as cold and inorganic closures are recast through these artworks as spaces of memory, intimacy, and desire. Examples of their works include: Smith’s “How We Tell Stories to Children” (2015) and “Ordinary Violence” (2017), which document her visits to and correspondences with her long incarcerated father, highlighting intimate interactions between people as they traverse this prison space; Waheed’s “The Cyphers” (2016), which emerges out of her encounters with aerial surveillance during her childhood in Saudi Arabia, combining found objects of debris with delicate drawings and collages suggestive of Waheed’s childhood scrapbooks; Taryn Simon’s “Contraband” (2010), which addresses the circulation of American desire through a series of photographs of contraband items seized at JFK airport over a five day period; and, finally, Jill

Magid's "Evidence Locker" (2004), which emerged out of a one month period spent by Magid developing a close and personal collaboration with CCTV camera operators in Liverpool, UK. In each case, the work becomes an index of the human body as it interacts with these systems. What these works share is the cultivation of various forms of intimacy as a mode of antagonizing otherwise impersonal systems of power.

In drawing attention to these four young artists, my interest is to distinguish the critical function of their work from that of previous generations of artists working within the tradition of so-called 'institutional critique.' I understand this distinction to be the following: that the aim of these young artists' practices is not to expose the contradictions underlying the institutions in question, but rather to introduce a playful hiccup into their order of operations. Put differently, their aim is not to perform a critical negation of these systems of surveillance and incarceration - i.e., reveal their limits so as to show how they might be otherwise – but rather to demonstrate what possible freedoms and intimacies persist within or beside the current limitations provided.

The goal of my project is to ask how the radical experiments of Magid, Smith, Simon, and Waheed create a meaningful way of responding aesthetically to the transformation of public space into surveillance environments. In making experiences of intimacy the starting point for their participation in these spaces, I argue that they make way for a timely and substantial dialogue between art historical readings of Institutional Critique and theories of affect, intimacy, and love within Gender and Sexuality Studies.