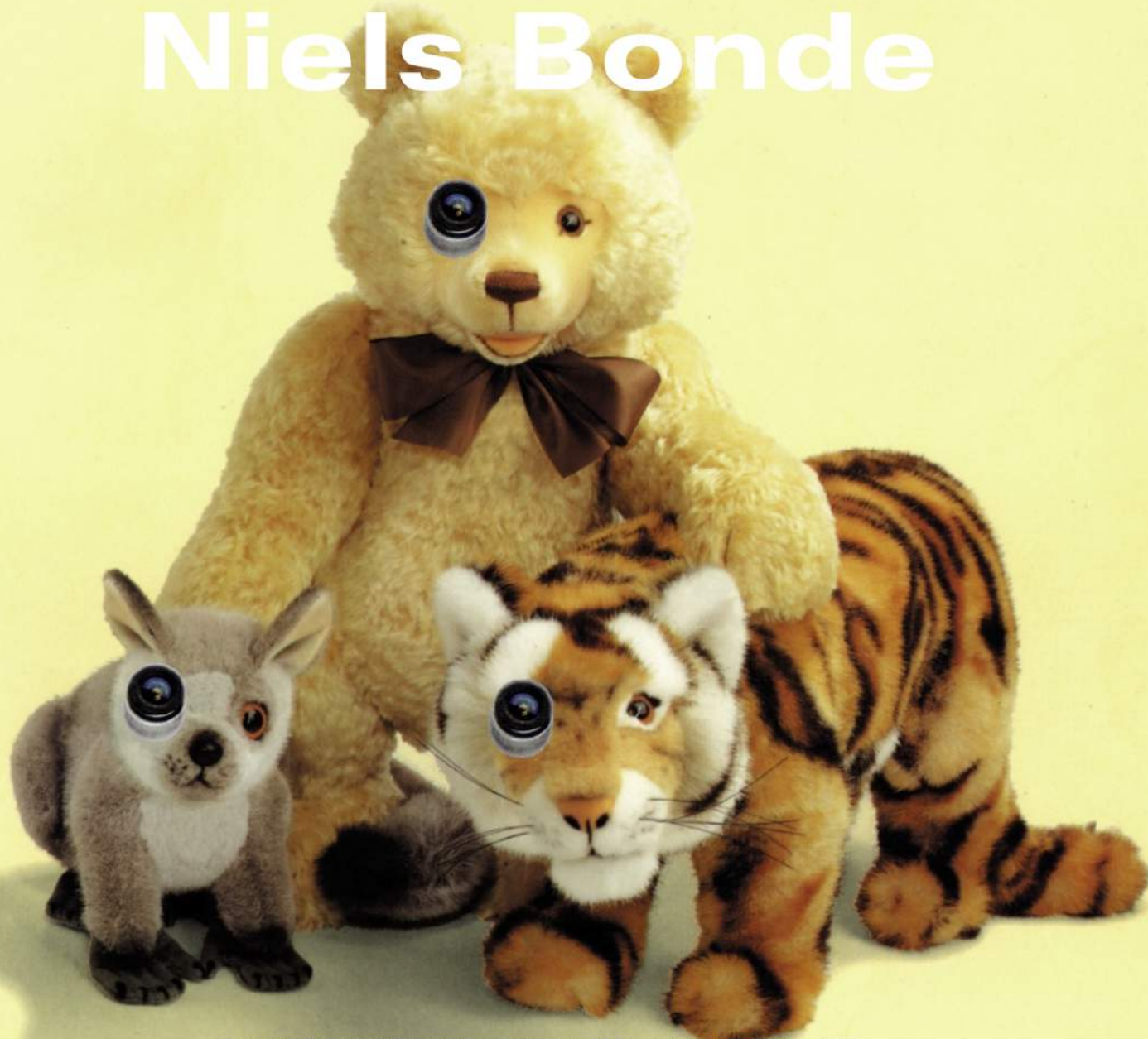


# Niels Bonde



The Art of Detection: Surveillance in society MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1997.



**Niels Bonde**



**Jennifer Ridell**

## You're the Star of the Show

**Niels Bonde's tripartite installation**, unified and housed within an "apartment" setting in the gallery, manifests the psychological ramifications and conflicts of watching and being watched. The little flat's furnishings and objects are peppered, disturbingly, with small spy cameras and radio transmitters. Some, like those contained in the stuffed animals, are small and discreet, requiring a second glance. They resemble those plush toys that are commercially available as household "plants" for concerned parents to monitor the behavior of babysitters in the parents' absence. Others, like the radio transmitter housed in the athletic shoe, or the camera inserted into the cactus leaf, protrude in an obvious fashion.

**In one view**, it represents the Orwellian nightmare of total control, in which your private sanctuary the home has been sullied with surveillance devices. Is it paranoid to suspect that the devices infiltrated the home at the hands of corporate agents wishing to demographically profile your every preference, desire, and action? Or is it that we have put them there ourselves, entranced as we are with seeing ourselves represented. Who is watching? Does it matter? Have we begun to fear that perhaps no one is watching at all?

**Bonde's installation** stems from the effects of immersion within a society in which watching and being watched have become paramount to its functioning, economically and culturally. The boundaries between the producers and the consumers of imagery afforded by trickle-down technology which has put numerous digital and electronic imaging devices into the eager hands of consumers, as well as the hawklike attunement of those who shape our world culturally and visually to consumers' desires and preferences have become blurred. The back and forth in Bonde's installation between the sense that the privacy of its hypothetical inhabitants is being violated and the sense that they have invited the enemy into their own backyard, reinforces the fact that the boundaries between the two have dissolved. As Scher's installation similarly suggests, there is something seductive about being the subject of all the attention: does it matter in the end that the images and information that are being gathered or that you willingly submit are being fed back to you in the form of a product that you yourself consume and even purchase?





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**Our insatiable appetites** for cultural fare that bears our own imprimatur whether it is a home video at the backyard barbeque, MTV's Real Life program for which the young and svelte can audition to participate (such individuals naturally giving the best impression of "real life"! ), or the curiously retro spectacle of the Today show in which tourists visiting New York throng in front of the cameras wielding signs addressed to their mother or dog, along with cakes and baseball caps for the programs hosts attests to the fact we are indeed in love with our "own" images, whether it is our own face, or the sight of "real" people, bearers of authenticity and experiences to which we can relate. Television studios are happy to comply by continuing to roll out so-called reality-based programming, which despite its moniker, bears great similarity to the usual escapist fare of commercial TV. Even celebrities to whom we cannot relate, who remain intractably part of an entertainment fantasy sphere, have taken note of people's hunger for the product of the real, have succumbed to ever-more intimate "tell-all" interviews and ostentatiously wear jeans, uncombed hair, and no makeup to prove that they're just like the rest of us. The media industry helps too by become ever-intruding with greater insistence into the lives of people we wish to situate in a world that is coextensive with ours ("Look! They wear the same jeans and use the same cell phone as I do!") sometimes hounding them to death, as in the case of Princess Diana, whose demise was at least partially attributable to insatiable paparazzi.

Excerpt from the catalogue text for the show: "The Art of Detection: Surveillance in society" at MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1997.

### **Jennifer Ridell**

art historian and curator at MIT List Visual Arts Center.





*"Paranoia, in some respects, I think, is a modern-day development of an ancient, archaic sense that animals still have-quarry-type animals-that they're being watched. . . . I say paranoia in an atavistic sense. It's a lingering sense, that we had long ago, when we were-our ancestors were-very vulnerable to predators, and this sense tells them they're being watched. And they're being watched probably by something that's going to get them. . . . And often my characters have this feeling."*

Philip K Dick.



**They control me through the TV set**

In the building where I used to live, a paranoid woman had a studio in the basement for several years until she, under duress, was removed by the police. In the process, this supposedly dried up little woman broke the arm and a couple of ribs of a tall policeman. The landlord told me that she was a lithographic artist educated at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, and maintained a printing facility in the basement studio. When I saw after she had been thrown out by the police, the cellar looked like the scene of a horror film with enormous heaps of bizarre debris and an improvised toilet in the back of the room. Unfortunately, this lady's proclivities to arson and the subsequent dousing of the fire lent the already unhealthy arrangements a rather dank character on top of everything. But until she was removed, she had, on a daily or rather, nightly, basis tacked neatly calligraphed messages to the wall or door outside her studio. The most often recurring themes of these messages were that someone was watching her and that Anker Joergensen (Danish prime minister in the 1970s) and the butcher were sending ultraviolet rays through the basement.

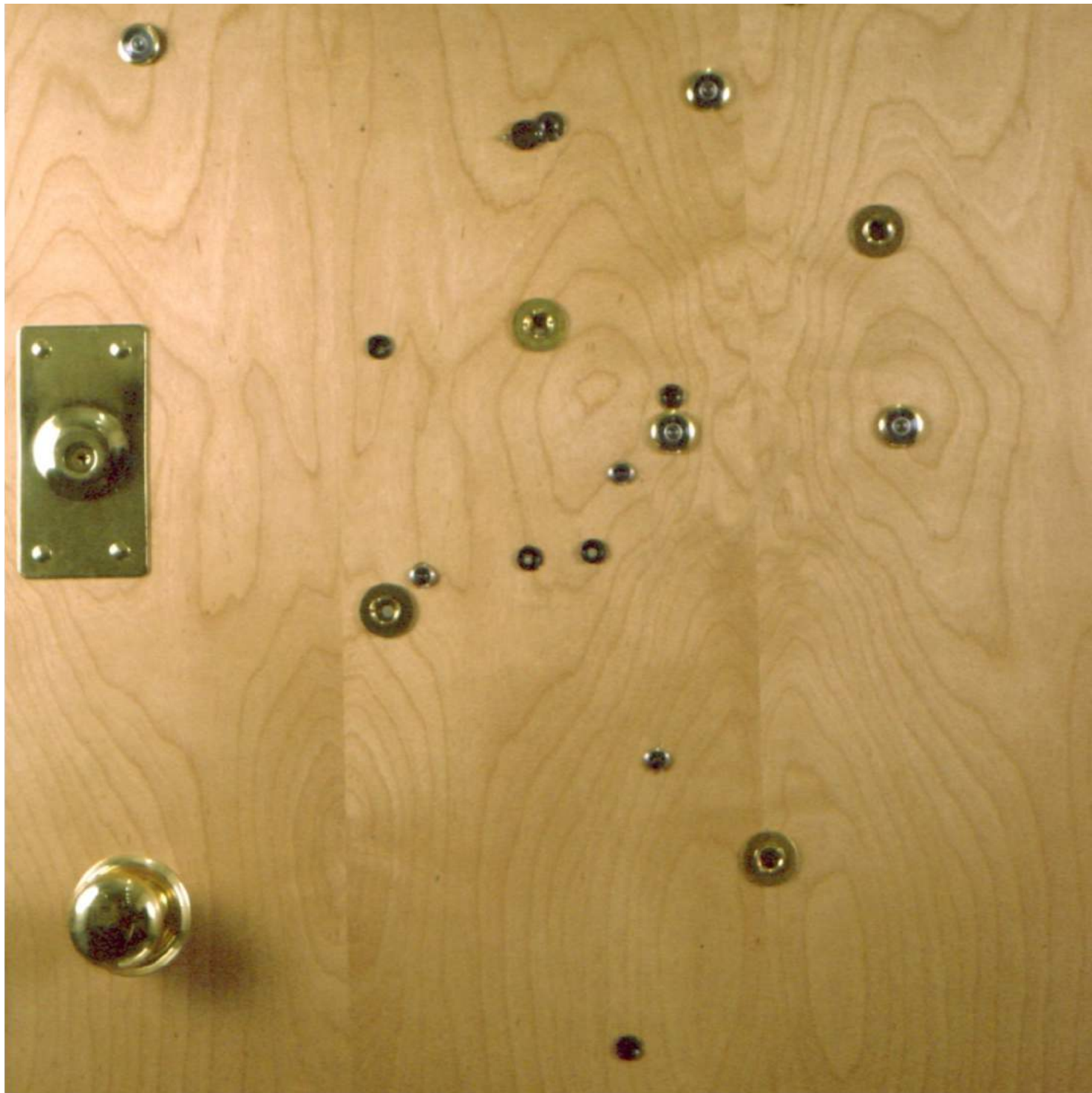
**The angels tap and train us**

The phrase originates from a mad, paranoid, persecuted man "AK", who hands out his Xeroxed flyers on the streets of Copenhagen. In these he describes his conspiracy theories of how the Secret Police of Denmark tap and control us. This organization operates by installing radio transmitters in blackheads in people's pores as well as by exchanging people's shoes for an identical pair in a smaller size. "AK" has constructed this organization and its activities from the small day-to-day irritations he experiences. The weirdest part of it is how all his explanations are invariably connected to technology: tiny cameras, microphones, ultra- and infra-sound, etc.

**I never had hair on the body or the head**

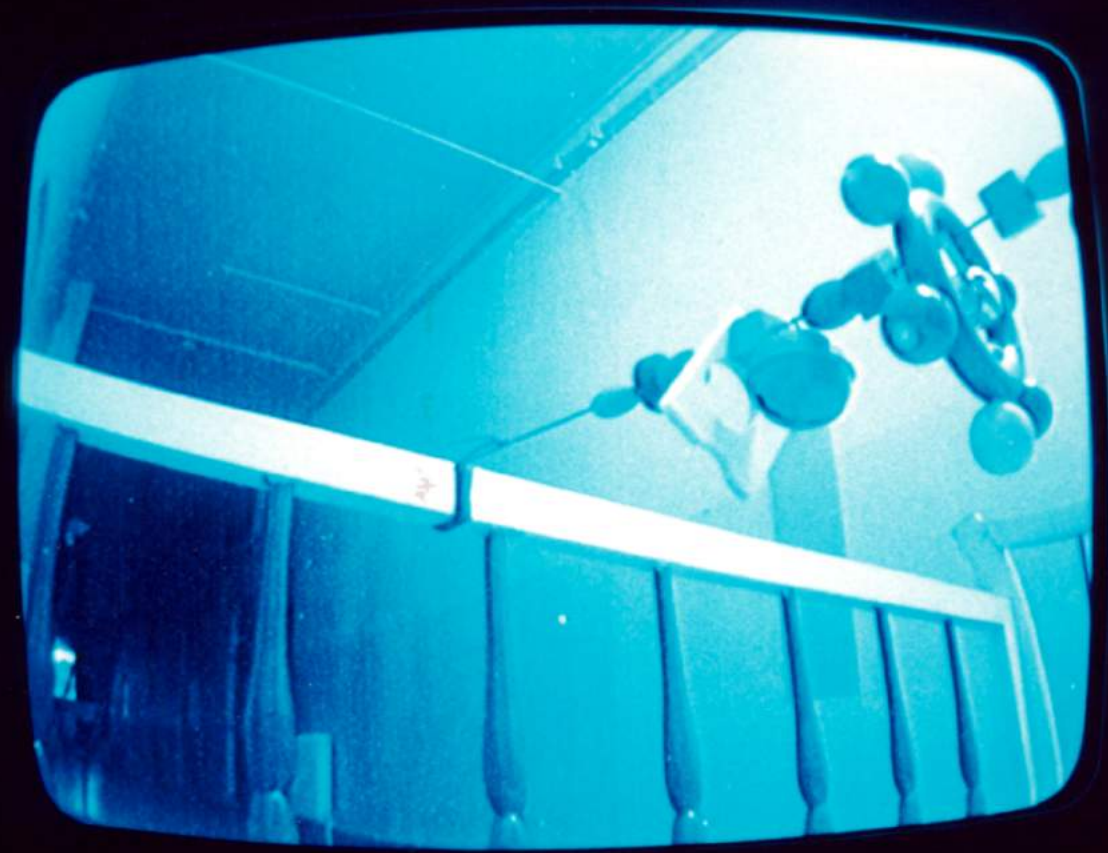
This statement is excerpted from a test administered by Nordvang, a psychiatric hospital in the suburbs of Copenhagen. The patient has to answer "yes" or "no" as to the likelihood that he or she would have uttered one of 200 given statements. This allows the doctors to make a simple assessment of the type of patient they are dealing with. I know about the test because there was a time when nearly all my friends were more or less (mentally) disturbed and half of them were in psychiatric hospitals. While some of my mad friends had delusions of a religious nature, others believed themselves to be part of a science-fiction story. Anyway, I found the questionnaire so intriguing that I had to let it be part of my work. At that time I was collaborating with a friend, "JK", who (by the way) was not hospitalized. We exchanged our artworks in progress, and when I sent him some extracts from the Nordvang questionnaire which I had incorporated into an artwork, he misconstrued my intent, thinking that I was questioning his sanity. He was so insulted that he didn't speak to me for a while.

**Niels Bonde, 1996.**







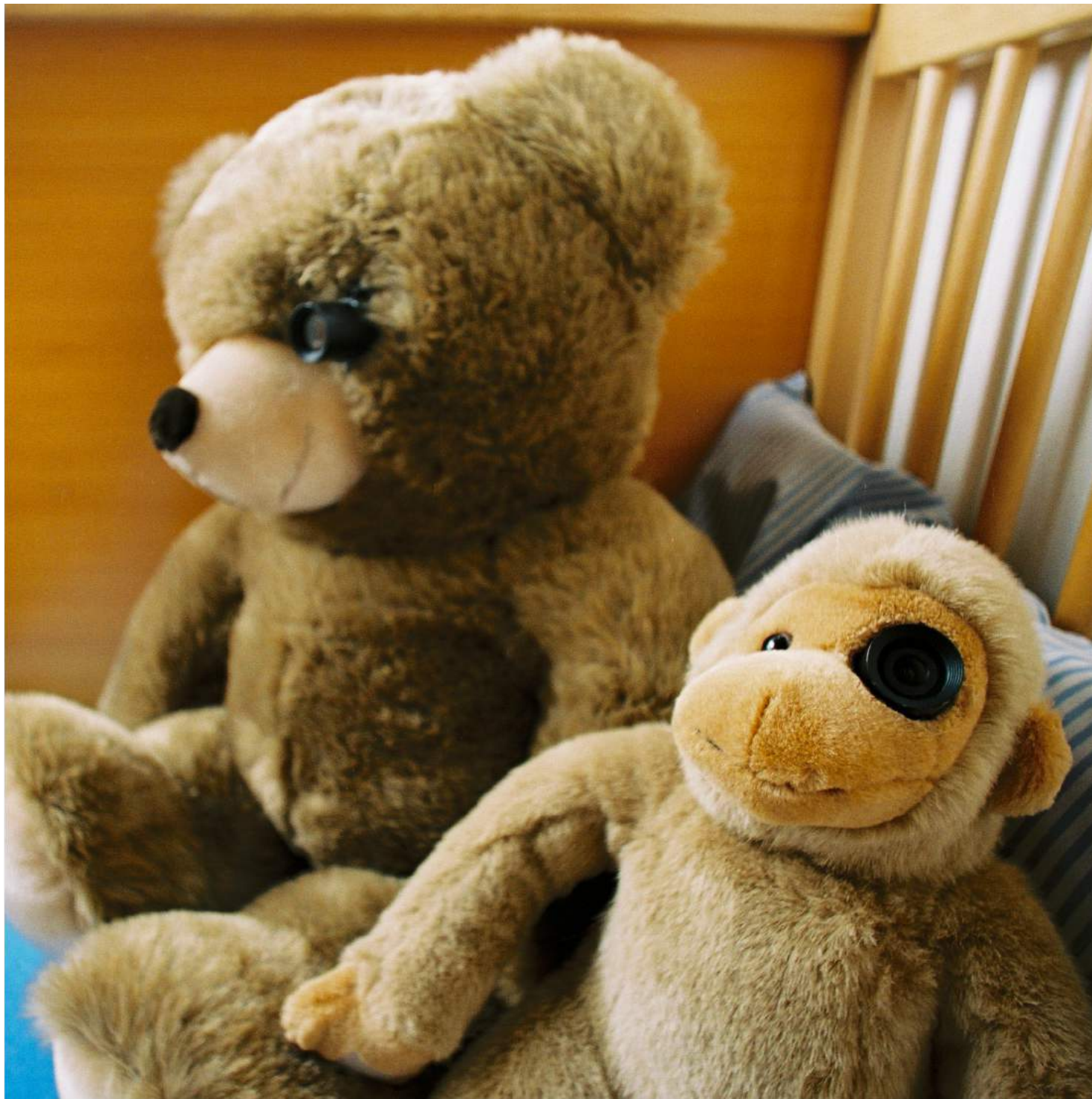




















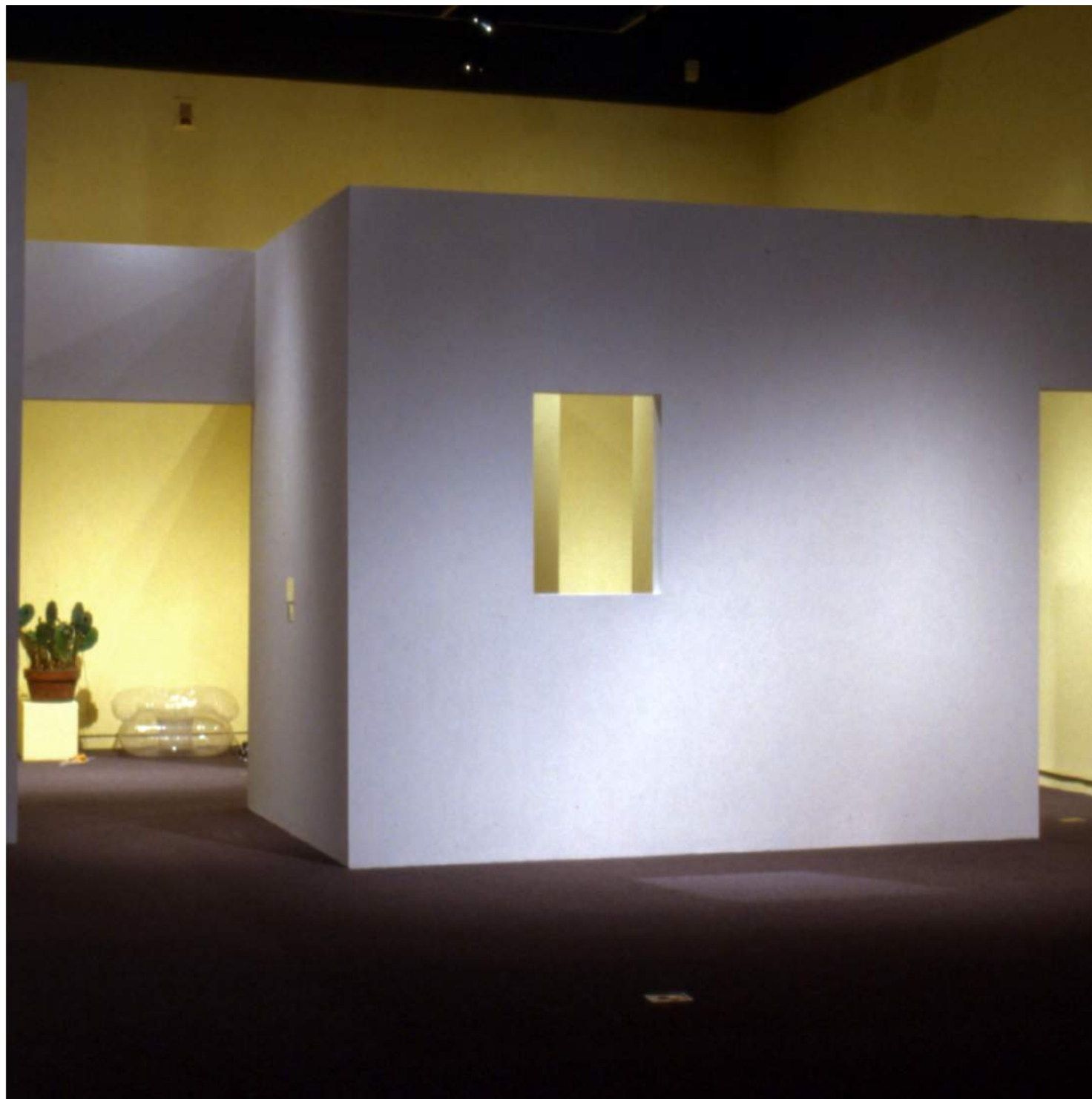














**Maia Damianovic**

## For your eyes only

*The incident happened at 5:15 p.m. ...the camera recorded it...you have to be aware...anything could happen...you have to watch...precisely at 11:45 p.m....*

**Surveillance of any kind** is inherently ambiguous. By nature it implies a certain stealth and underhandedness. From the banal level of the Linda Tripp-Monica Lewinsky scenario, to the more sophisticated political-economical manipulations and reconnaissances, watchfulness is something culture and everyday life foist on us. Niels Bonde's work lodges itself in the often annoyingly nebulous interstices between privacy and the intrusion of various forms of surveillance. It evokes an uncomfortable moment between vigilance and angst, when our fear cannot be precisely located, and when we don't know where the clear and present danger is, although we are prey to latent apprehensions.

**Questions of philosophy, science, politics, economics, ethics and morality** all play a part in Bonde's work, yet at no time, does the artist give way to pretensions of clarifying this jumble of concerns, preferring, instead to reveal a story directly, almost neutrally without passing a judgement, as if acknowledging that the rules of the game are always more complicated than we think. In a way, Bonde creates quizzical mind games, more controversial than clear, that address the ever present specter of surveillance in an electronically globalized infotech world, wheeling and dealing in information and spiraling into increasingly ambiguous realities. In our urge to gratify the virtual Vegas of our imagination, to feed our desires and wants, we are increasingly turning into self-centered high-tech voyeurs. After all, despite the potential down sides, we want the convenience of on-line shopping, of data banks with the best information on hand. We want, we want, we want...often overlooking that to possess, to know, to grasp, information or anything else, are symptoms of sheer power. Bonde asks us: are we being radically betrayed by our own needs and desires? And, indeed, surveillance systems, high-tech reconnaissance, genetic mapping, browsing on the web, have spread everywhere, fraying the edges between public good and loss of freedom, individually and categorization, utopia and dystopia



*... Total on line shopping sales for 1997 = \$ 2.6 billion...Total on line shopping sales for 1998 = \$ 5 billion .... 62% of people would like to know, through genetic profiling, what harmful diseases they might suffer from later in life...Our children will be able to choose their children's trait: to select their personalities, athletic abilities, IQ, gender..Within a decade or two, it may be possible to screen kids almost before conception for an enormous range of attributes, such as how tall they're likely to be, what body type they will have, their hair and eye color ..... you have to be aware .. a single drop of blood or a snippet of hair or a scrapping of skin can reveal the full length of the human DNA....*

**The loosely grouped series of works** cleverly titles *The Conversation*, in homage to Coppola's classic film of surveillance and violence, reveals an intimate, auto-biographical side to Bonde's work that also harbors a strong affection for the fallacy of the human condition and hints of an individual struggling under the burden of societal control. In a three part installation, the artist recounts technologically assisted pranks from high school, so called "set-ups", where unpopular kids were lured under various pretexts to bad mouth other other kids while their conversions were surreptitiously taped and subsequently played back on the school's loud speaker system. Standing theatrically in the exhibition space is an ordinary closet, an actual 1:1 scale copy of the one used by the culprits to tape their classmates, except this time, the inclusion of a four camera closed circuit surveillance system offers more than a hint that something is afoot. As we enter and sink into the darkness of the closet, the cameras give us a guided tour of the exhibition, where real time images of visitors to the exhibit are mixed in with taped footage showing enactments of people in extreme strange situations: naked, sitting on the toilet, or encircling the closet in large numbers. This theatrical set-up, echoing the real-life one from Bonde's youth, seems to work. Left to their own devices, veiled in the tenebrous privacy of the closet, viewers are transformed into anonymous voyeurs. They enact their own private phantasms and obsessions, leaving behind a wall of scribbled graffiti as their personal trace. **In an enlarged, life size, colorful class photograph** we get to see all the participants in Bonde's tale of teenage malaise, all fresh, scrubbed, youthful faces smiling back at us innocently, not a hint of mischief, making us wonder what was the artist's role in this high-school psycho drama of insincerity and betrayal? Was he betrayed or was he a betrayer?

**Is *The Conversation*** a reflection of pain or guilt? Bonde, coyly, never provides a clear answer, nor does he pander to the standard moral clichés. Rising above the level of a mere cautionary story teller, he insinuates more questions than he ever intends to answer, leaving the viewer to pick up the emotional left overs and sort them out on their own. The artist provokes us to feel part of a shared complicity: that surveillance records something real, not acted or scripted, and that the players have little or no proof they're under scrutiny, is highly seductive - something each and every one of us can become hooked on. Bonde's multi-faceted portrayal of insidious betrayal allows us to grasp the vulnerability of the individual exposed to violence of social machines of surveillance. It also raises issues about control - the control we exert over ourselves and others, using stratagems of love, hope and fear. *The Conversation* poignantly speaks of the isolation of the individual from the world around them. Yes, kids are cruel, but so are adults.





*The incident happened at 5:15 p.m. .... the camera recorded it ... know where the danger is ... watch your back ... you have to be aware ... anything could happen ... you have to watch ... precisely at 11:45 p.m. ... Maybe it's a dream or maybe it's a memory ... I don't know which....I'm not getting away from wherever 'm trying to get away from. They've got me ... you can't live with the fear, but you know it's there ... anything could happen ... you have to watch ... again something unforeseen, unaccounted for in advance, has gone ahead and happened ... precisely at 11:45 p.m. ....*

**For the installation I Never Had Hair on My Body or Head**, the exhibition space is made to represent an apartment, complete with furnishings, a baby crib, fluffy stuffed toys, personal toiletries, plants, ordinary everyday items, many of them more or less obviously implanted with some type of high-tech surveillance device. Spy cameras, radio transmitters, monitors are everywhere, yet the setting is so serene and in a certain way spotless, that it becomes disturbing. Bonde's installation offers a trenchant critique of life under a watchful and dominant eye. Its sensibility, would seem to lie squarely within such dystopian classics as "We," "Brave New World," or "1984," yet what the work evokes is both more ambiguous and metaphorical. Surveillance in Bonde's work, as in contemporary life, becomes a more unsettling, less clear cut presence. Is it around security and protection, like the ubiquitous technology we are all used to in subways, public buildings, corporate offices, private elevators and intercoms, even on street corners observing potential traffic violators? Does it represent some aberrant form of cyber voyeurism or cyber narcissism, someone spying on private moments, playing God or enacting some other form of self-gratification? Does it provide live veracity based entertainment for a Real Life MTV generation used to 92 channels of opportunity? Who are the players, are they willing or unknowing participants? Is someone directing our lives, are we complicit players in the pursuit of our wants, needs, obsessions, and imaginings? Who is behind the watchful eye, a profit-minded corporation, a cautious health insurer who wants to know what's in our DNA or cautious parents monitoring the babysitter. Is it some high-tech peeping Tom obsessed with someone else's daily life, or perhaps, an exhibitionist obsessed with their own (one of the most frequented web sites, mylifeonline., belongs to a Seattle Washington woman who enacts a kind of voluntary Truman Show scenario by recording all her daily activities on seventeen cameras strategically places throughout her house, thus, making what is usually considered private excruciatingly public). And, where do the tapes end up? Who will own all this information? Which data bank will it be entered into?

**Bonde doesn't placate the dilemmas.** Surveillance, he suggests, is a messy business. Whether as an instrument to access and gather information, to assist or protect, to gratify or entertain, it casts a looming shadow. What are we to believe? This problematic question is posed directly in another piece, Die Freundliche Seele. A door is pierced with fifteen seemingly ordinary peep holes, the kind customarily found in apartments, except in this case, some looking "in" and some looking "out," giving the viewer the opportunity to have multiple points of view, from "inside" looking out and from the "outside" looking in. Bonde suggests that the eye of the surveillance is everywhere, watching and being watched, ricocheting the gaze, as if asking who is zooming whom?



*..The incident happened about 5:15 p.m. ... Total on line shopping sales for 1997 = \$ 2.6 billion ... Total on line shopping sales for 1998 = \$ 5 billion. .... 62% of people would like to know, ... the camera recorded it ... you have to be aware .... anything could happen ... you have to...*

**Bonde's representation of surveillance** explores the obsession of watching. It makes us pay attention, but doesn't attempt to reconcile the many contradictions, suggesting, rather, that surveillance - watching - is a reciprocal relation, that implies to be under watch and to watch, but also to be watchful and to be watched. Under the right circumstances, we can all feel seduced by the surreptitious glimpses offered by surveillance; the seeming promise of a certain tempting proximity, by stripping the other - the surveilled, making them transparent, accessible, seemingly closer. To stealthily enter into another person's life without their knowledge, is seductive. It is empowering. In its darker recesses, it is also violent. Niels Bonde's work brings us to a deeply contradictory revelation of desire and power that implicates both the watcher and the watched as prisoners of an image, trapped in the charisma of a surface that conceals as it reveals.

#### **Maia Damianovic**

Maia Damianovic is an art historian, curator and writer based in NY.







Niels Bonde (born Glostrup Denmark 1961)

Educated at The Royal Danish Art Academy Fine Arts department in Copenhagen 1988-1994 and Städelschule Institut für Neue Medien in Frankfurt am Main 1993-1995. Teaching at Malmö Art Academy 1999-2005 as well as on Kunsthøjskolen in Holbæk from 2010 to the present.

Residencies at International Studio and Curatorial Program New York and in DCA in Berlin. In 2005 recipient of the Danish Foundation for Arts 3-year work grant.

Exhibitions at MIT List Visual Arts Center, Stedelijk Museum, Deutsche Hygiene Museum, ZKM, Statens Museum for Kunst Denmark.

Niels Bonde is a pioneer of digital art in Denmark, working in traditional media as well as video, installation and digital media.

In 1995 he co-founded Artnode an early digital arts platform.



Input = Output. Installation. 1995.