

VAS VISUAL ART eNEWSLETTER

October 5, 2024

PRESENTED BY VISUAL ART SOURCE, THE DEMOCRACY CHAIN and FABRIK

Julie Weist, "Private Eye"

by Jody Zellen

Moskowitz Bayse Gallery, Los Angeles, California, continuing through October 19, 2024

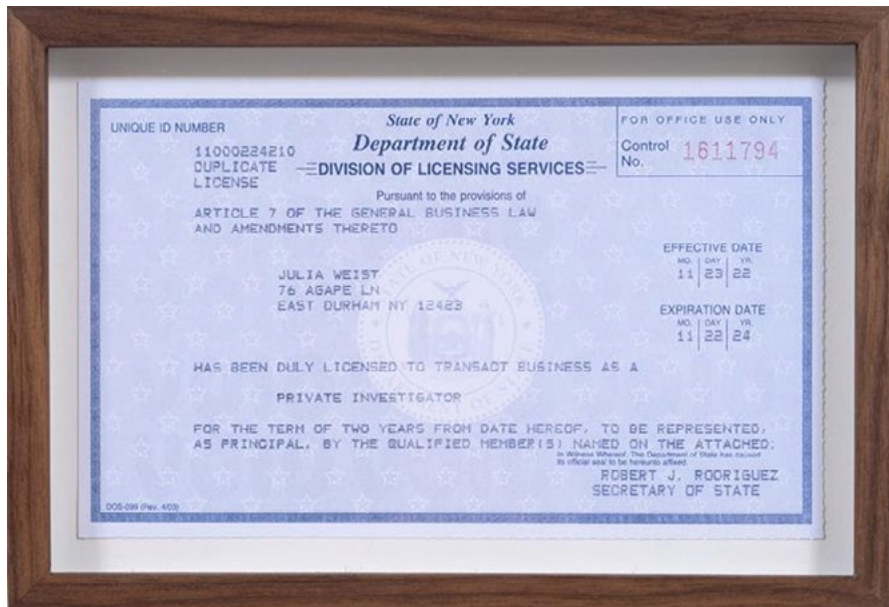


Julie Weist, "OUTATIME from the DRNsights Database," 2024, archival pigment print, 37 3/8 x 51 x 1 1/2".

In 1969, Vito Acconci realized "Following Piece," in which he followed random strangers as they traversed New York City. He concluded each surveillance when the person entered a building. Photographs, maps and notes comprise Acconci's multi-panel conceptual artwork. In Sophie Calle's "The Detective" (1980) she hired a detective to follow her. In another work, "Suite Vénitienne" (1983), she became the follower rather than the followed, chronicling the surveillance of Henri B as he wandered the pathways of Venice, Italy. As a book, as well as an installation, "Suite Vénitienne" was made up of texts, maps and photographs documenting the process of trailing and spying on someone.

Now comes Julie Weist's "Private Eye" documents Weist's stint as a private investigator (PI) in New York beginning in 2022. Weist decided on this course of action as part of a public art project that began with a laborious application process — and much to her surprise was approved, much to her surprise. The PI license gives one access to databases that contain information on private citizens. Weist's investigations centered on cars, so she searched the database for various types of license plates. While she purportedly followed the rules surrounding searches as a PI, her pursuits were somewhat out of the ordinary.

An example is the display of a framed facsimile of her PI license. The full title of the work, "All persons to whom such license certificates have been issued shall be responsible for the safekeeping of the same, and shall not lend, enable, let or allow any other person to have, hold, use or display such certificate; and any person so parting with such a license certificate or displaying the same without authority shall be guilty of a misdemeanor" (2024) calls into question the legality of exhibiting — and perhaps even selling — this document as a work of art.



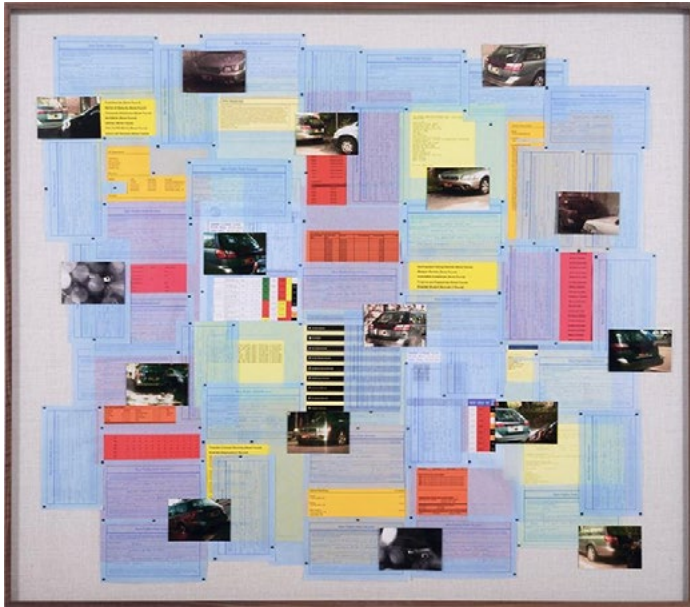
Julie Weist. "All persons to whom such license certificates have been issued shall be responsible for the safekeeping of the same, and shall not lend, enable, let or allow any other person to have, hold, use or display such certificate; and any person so parting with such a license certificate or displaying the same without authority shall be guilty of a misdemeanor," 2024, inkjet print, 6 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 1 1/2".

In "OUTATIME from the DRNsights Database" (2024), Weist creates digital collages juxtaposing surveillance photographs that home in on car license plates with satellite images of the cars' supposed locations. "OUTATIME" is a reference to the film "Back to the Future." Many of its fans have souvenir plates with the phrase. Weist searched for these online and displays the photographs that were called up. The framed archival pigment print juxtaposes printed snapshots taken by surveillance cameras that Weist found in the database with aerial views of neighborhoods from locations all over the U.S. Each image of a car is centered in a view of the neighborhood where it was located. More than thirteen pairings are collaged together within this large print. In addition to "OUTATIME," Weist also looked at license plates that read "honk," "found," and "artwork." The associated photographs are similarly printed out with mapped locations and incorporated into digital collages.

In some ways, Weist's pieces, especially those in her "Vehicle Sightings Series," can be seen as performances. When Weist discovered that tow trucks eager to repossess cars hunt for them like live prey, she staged quasi-performances by parking her car near repo yards hoping that webcams would photograph her car and feed it into the database. To make it more "fun" she would "dress up" her Subaru in different ways, one time covering it with flowers, and in another instance a tutu. In "Watching the Watcher" she entered the plates of the repo tow trucks she saw going after cars slated to be repossessed, presenting these often out-of-focus and cropped snapshots of repossessions in progress in grids of nine.

Weist also includes three beautiful abstract handmade paper pieces. These are compiled from shredded documents, inspired as they are by the fact that one mandate of being a PI is to shred evidence. "People with Traffic Citations in My Town: Guilty & Dismissed (Wildcard Search for Self)" (2024), contains fragments from random traffic citations, again culled from the PI database, that meld with raw and colorful paper fibers. Weist inevitably implicates or surveils herself in a number of her works. In "Self Portrait from the Vehicle Sightings series" and "Self Portrait as Investigator and Investigated" (both 2023), she collages images depicting the license plate of her green Subaru with "Non-Public Data Access Forms" and other handwritten records.

This is an intriguing and complex body of work. Weist investigates archives using data — images and texts — as the raw materials that launch creative explorations. Artists have a long tradition of mining archives (Lyle Ashton Harris, Leslie Hewitt, Fiona Tan, Adam Pendleton and Theaster Gates, to mention just a few), but Weist's pursuit is a bit different in that she had to actually become a Private Investigator to gain access to information not available to the general public. In doing so, she opened, as she says, a "can of worms" about surveillance, ethics, and vulnerability stating, "I think that the vulnerability really comes from not knowing that these systems are operating."



Julie Weist, "Lost from the DRNsights Database,"
2024, archival pigment print, 19 x 33 3/4 x 1/12".



Julie Weist, "People with Traffic Citations in My Town:
Guilty & Dismissed (Wildcard Search for Self)," 2024,
handmade paper, 43 x 38 x 33 1/2 x 1 1/2".

In exposing what goes on behind the scenes "Private Eye" can be interpreted as a warning sign — like the panopticon that Michel Foucault writes about so elegantly in "Discipline & Punish" — that everyone is being watched. Big data is Foucault's new omnipresent eye.

Jody Zellen is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist's books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit www.jodyzellen.com