



**ANNE O'CALLAGHAN**

UTOPIA! WHO'S LISTENING NOW

April 22 - May 20

Opening Sunday, April 22, 2-4pm



Image: *The Watchers*, 2018, installation.

# UTOPIA! WHO'S LISTENING NOW

Essay by Sandy Saad, Curator of Exhibitions and Education,  
Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

Anne O'Callaghan is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice incorporates a wide range of media, including text, photo-based works, artist books, video, sound installation, and sculpture. For over three decades, O'Callaghan has devoted her artistic practice to exploring politics, memory, and the ways in which artists can effect change.

*Utopia! Who's Listening Now* is an exhibition comprised of a series of installations through which O'Callaghan responds to recent political events. Her work explores, subverts, and deconstructs the ways in which governments, police forces, institutions, and corporations have developed and employed methods of surveillance, communication, and propaganda.

Visitors entering the main gallery are introduced to *The Watchers*, a series of metal-headed mannequins in trench like coats. Their attire suggests authority and recalls the heavy greatcoats originally designed for European soldiers and military officers. Tall and brute, their dominating presence creates an uneasy tension with visitors who walk amongst them. A small image of an eye in the gallery is a blatant symbol of the eyes that watch, record, and scrutinize within *The Watchers*. It is accompanied by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words:

**"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality... Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."**

The text is placed next to an image of Maher Arar, known for his extraordinary rendition in 2002, a real-world example of the consequences of surveillance. Arar had been watched by a Canadian national security investigative team after his 2001 meeting with a man who authorities believed had links to Al Qaeda. Arar was detained during a layover in New York on his way home to Canada from a family vacation in Tunis. He was held without charges in solitary confinement in the United States for nearly two weeks, questioned, and denied meaningful access to a lawyer. Suspecting that he was a member of Al Qaeda, the US government deported him, not to Canada, but to Syria, his place of birth. There he was detained and tortured for almost a year, until his release to Canada.

The Syrian government later stated that Arar was "completely innocent." In 2006, a Canadian commission publicly cleared Arar of any links to terrorism, and in 2007 he received a formal apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper as well as \$10.5 million in compensation from the federal government. Arar has since become a prominent human rights activist. In her visual allusion to Arar, O'Callaghan presents the very real threats of the watchers of our world, and points out the potential consequences of faulty government surveillance and intelligence gathering.

The invasion of privacy escalates in *Who is Listening Now*. The sound installation in the small gallery features small recording devices that pick up conversations and sounds that take place within the space. The sounds are then played back in a muffled tone after a delay, with just enough clarity for listeners to recognize their voices. The broken-telephone playback installation positions the visitor as simultaneously the object of observation and the interpreter of the recording. The installation is accompanied by Emily Dickinson's poem, *260*.



**I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you - Nobody - too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd advertise - you know!**

**How dreary - to be - Somebody!  
How public - like a Frog -  
To tell one's name - the livelong June -  
To an admiring Bog!**

Image: *Who is Listening Now*, 2018, installation.

Written in the nineteenth century, it seems to foreshadow a very real symptom of life in the digital twenty-first century. In a world of camera recordings, GPS tracking, and data mining, being somebody often has the consequence of being scrutinized. The poem challenges authority (the somebodies) and presents anonymity as a form of freedom. *260* is especially poignant in the face of the 2018 Facebook and Cambridge Analytica data breach. Cambridge Analytica, a political consulting firm, combines data mining and data analysis to create "psychographic" profiles of voters, which are used to make key electoral campaign decisions on how to communicate with supporters, undecided voters, and non-supporters. In 2015 a third-party app called "thisisyourdigitallife", advertised as an academic research application, collected data from approximately 270,000 Facebook users. By giving permission to acquire their data, users unknowingly gave the app data on their unconsenting friend networks, which resulted in information on over 80 million users. The data was then used by Cambridge Analytica to consult for the Donald Trump campaign during the 2016 U.S. Elections. The practice of purchasing data is common in Canadian, American, and European political campaigns looking to learn about voters' habits. O'Callaghan's positioning of visitors as subjects and watchers poses questions about how we are recorded, profiled, and potentially manipulated.



Image: *Collateral Damage*, 2018, installation.

In the loft gallery, O'Callaghan ends the show with *Collateral Damage*, a hanging installation of light-refracting clear song bird cut-outs. O'Callaghan uses the birds to reflect on another world matter: movement and migration. Migrant birds attempt an arduous voyage every year, crossing continents and oceans, and enduring the dangers of storms, hunters, collisions with manmade objects including wind turbines, and starvation. It is estimated that 50% of birds do not return to their destinations. Despite this, they migrate every year. Their hopeful resilience resembles the vigour O'Callaghan has observed in today's migrants, many of whom also take on strenuous journeys, crossing continents and oceans despite the threats of kidnappings, drownings, gang violence and deportations. Like the birds, they make their way to other parts of the world in search of the basic necessities for a healthy life. The installation is accompanied by a video projection of two male swans engaging in a deadly conflict while competing for the affection of a female. The swans swimming in Lake Ontario begin their match with a contentious greeting. Their quarrel reveals



Image: Detail from *Collateral Damage*, 2018, installation.



Image: Still from video *Collateral Damage*, 2018, installation. Running time 8 minutes, 58 seconds.

they can be violent and invasive creatures, despite their beauty. Swans, native to Europe and eastern Asia, were brought to North America as pets and ornamental birds in the late 1800's to early 1900's. They have multiplied, wiping out entire wetlands of submerged aquatic vegetation, their preferred food source. Their human-enforced migration has caused their displacement and harm to their new environments. Here O'Callaghan juxtaposes two sides of the migration story: The often rejected migrants who face the difficult journeys and uncertainties to make a home, and non-native settlers who have occupied a territory and abused it for their own survival and benefit. The words of Walter Benjamin accompany the installation:

**"There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."**

The text highlights the inherent process of othering in the pursuit of establishing a *civilization*. The term that often evokes notions of progress and advancement, is shown to distinguish certain people, and degenerate others who do not conform to its ideals. O'Callaghan points out the othering that takes place in the process of encountering newcomers and migrants from varying cultures and backgrounds.

*In Utopia! Who's Listening Now*, Anne O'Callaghan takes on very real questions concerning the politics of today's world and eloquently articulates her concerns within the gallery space. Her perceptive responses to the social, political and geographic events of our times are presented with poignancy and a visceral intuition. Her work takes us on discursive journeys and asks us to consider, to feel, and to question the ways in which we are affected by our world.

## BIOGRAPHY

Anne O'Callaghan is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice spans over three decades. Her practice includes performance, installation, video, and sculptural works devoted to the exploration of art, life and politics. O'Callaghan was born in Ireland and immigrated to Canada in 1968, where she earned a BFA from York University, Toronto. Her work has been presented in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Canada, Europe, and Asia.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

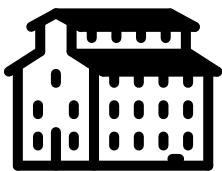
The artist would like to acknowledge the support of the Ontario Arts Council, Norman Verrall Audio and Donna Carruthers.



Above: *Collateral Damage*, 2018, installation.  
Cover image: *The Watchers*, 2018, installation.

## EVENTS PROGRAM

**Artist Talk:** Sunday, May 6, 2 - 4pm.  
This is a free event, please email your RSVP response to [communications@vac.ca](mailto:communications@vac.ca).



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## GALLERY HOURS

Monday: **Closed**  
Tuesday - Thursday: 10am - 9pm  
Friday - Sunday: 10am - 4pm

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