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Shock, Awe and a Touch of Humor

An innovative high-tech theater troupe made a stir at arts festivals around the world in 2006 with its multi-media presentation on the afflictions of information collection.

Along with the dbox visual arts organization, the Builders Association, a New York-based ensemble, created the performance, called "Super Vision," to pose the question, "Can we separate our identities from the cloud of data that surrounds us?" The show charts three chilling stories of lives reduced to data: a business traveler questioned at a border crossing, a family member trying to communicate with an elder, and a well-meaning father who steals his son's identity and is blind to the financial ruin ahead. "With cutting-edge digital animation, video and electronic music, 'Super Vision' makes the invisible 'datasphere' visible, using the language

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and technologies of surveillance itself," says New York director Marianne Weems, who created The Builders Association in 1994. There is humor, paranoia, and understandable concern interspersed together by way of text, sound, architecture, animation, video, and a half-dozen actors.

One critic called it "in your face theater of the future." A reviewer with *The Wall Street Journal* was ecstatic: "Not politics – it's poetry, a work of theatrical alchemy in which ideas are turned into art by making them more beautiful."

An introduction to the program says, "We are surrounded by subtle and unseen forms of surveillance of the data we create as we move through our daily lives, and at the same time our identities seem increasingly to be constituted of data. What is the relationship between who we are and the cloud of data which surrounds each one of us? In post-9/11 daily life, we have come to accept, allow, and even encourage this new post-visual form of surveillance and its constant incursions into the realm of our "selves." What forces encourage our permissiveness and engagement in the process of collecting this data and making it public, and what will the results of it be?" Weems calls this time of information overkill the "post-private era" and sees the personal information that is collected on us clustering in "data bodies," which circulate among us like organisms that "carry stains that are harder to clean than mud or sin."

"These bodies, separate from our physical bodies and infinitely more accessible, exist in a "data space" which, because it is inherently more complex than the visual, remains mostly invisible.

"We're trying to hold a mirror up to what exists." www.thebuildersassociation.org, info@the buildersassociation.org, 212/274-0446, www. superv.org.

"Super Vision" was a hit at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire last month, where it played for two nights as part of a week-long conference on private sector data collection. Prior to that, it appeared in Bogota, Singapore, Melbourne, London, and Rome – and to some extent in the U.S.

A member of the audience at Dartmouth, Professor M. Eric Johnson, director of the Glass-

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meyer/McNamee Center for Digital Strategies, reacted, "While we all have lingering concerns about the data footprints that follow us, Super Vision collected those nagging fears to deliver a modern thriller that was all too real. Using extensive technology to give life to our 'data bodies' – the data that grows to define us – the production captivated our audience of students and faculty from business to the humanities. Laughing one moment and gasping in the next, you couldn't help but look for the hidden cameras on the way out. Even in our rural New Hampshire hamlet, my colleagues and students agreed they won't feel the same about their medical records or credit cards."