Invisible Surveillance in Visual Art

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Abstract

Contemporary art has recently started to engage with surveillance. Before this trend developed art theory had developed a range of approaches to understanding identity in art, sometimes borrowing from social, psychoanalytic and political theory. Art work at the intersection of surveillance and identity tends to focus upon the representation of the human body as subject of surveillance and bearer of identity. However, contemporary surveillance is data, categorisation and flows of information as much as it is CCTV and images of the person. There are notably fewer works of art that engage with ‘dataveillance’. This paper engages with such artwork as a case study for assessing the suitability of contemporary art historical theories of identity to make sense of identity in a surveillance society.

Introduction

In recent years contemporary art has started to engage with issues of surveillance. Before this trend emerged art theory had developed a range of approaches to understanding identity in art, sometimes borrowing from social, psychoanalytic and political theory. Art work at the intersection of surveillance and identity has tended to focus upon the representation of the human body as subject of surveillance and bearer of identity. However, contemporary surveillance is data, categorisation and flows of information as much as it is CCTV and images of the person. There are notably fewer works of art that engage with ‘dataveillance’. At Tate Modern’s 2010 exhibition Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera, only four of 185 images dealt with dataveillance, and the overwhelming majority featured the human form (Phillips 2010). Similarly, in the 2001-2 exhibition Ctrl [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother, only a tiny minority of works dealt with surveillance through collation and capture of data, rather than the capture of visual images of the human form (Levin, Frohne and Weibel 2001). This paper identifies ten works by eight artists/artist collectives, which capture the tools and institutions associated with dataveillance, or explore and allow audiences to explore the associated issues in a more active way.¹ These works represent a large proportion of existing art works at this thematic intersection, though there are further examples within the performing arts, literature and visual culture as explored by McGrath (2004), Marx (1996), Nellis (2009) and Brighenti (2010). The works actively exploring dataveillance can be split into those concerned with institutional and governmental dataveillance, and those that engage with

¹ All of these works can be viewed online, at least in part. Wherever possible, we have provided working hyperlinks in the bibliography.
surveillance of qualitative data created by individuals using online technologies as part of their own identity production. Whilst an empirical rather than logically necessary division, these two types of artistic exploration are useful for considering some of the changes to identity practices in contemporary society. Against the background of the broader field of surveillance art, this research takes these works as a case study for assessing the suitability of contemporary art historical theories of identity for making sense of the representative politics of identity in a surveillance society. Our secondary concern is with the way that Surveillance Studies engages with cultural depictions of surveillance, which often mirrors the artistic focus upon vision and the body, and can frequently be uncritical and unreflective in its approach to the medium, unaware of the art-historical approaches already in existence. This paper points towards arguably more relevant cultural representations of surveillance which should also be considered in Surveillance Studies.

Although current scholarship recognises that identity is shifting and multifaceted, the majority of artistic practices that explore surveillance use traditional visual devices and are often limited to corporal and essentialist conceptions of identity. In focusing on the most prevalent arts practice, such as works shown at the Exposed and Ctrl [Space] exhibitions, art historical criticism with an eye towards surveillance has not been able to encompass works engaging with the complex modern conceptions and issues of identity. There may be a self-perpetuating aspect to this, as certain works of art, or exhibitions, become touch-points for discussion of the relationship between surveillance and art. Art historical scholarship, which has not yet considered dataveillance, could be enhanced by an understanding of both the politics and the arts practice in this area. The paper critically examines art works that attempt to explore issues of identity through the contemporary lens of data surveillance, to see whether they engage with identity in a way that is closer to recent scholarly conceptions, particularly those emerging from within Surveillance Studies and the broader social sciences. Modern theoretical conceptions of identity view it as a social process, multiple, in translation, contingent, and non-essential. This will be explored in more detail later. Given that dataveillance often relies upon binary categorisations and re-enforces established definitions of identity, this project will consider how this contemporary problematisation of identity is evoked in recent art works. In the preface to the 1999 edition of Gender Trouble Butler highlights the possibility of identity, ‘becoming an instrument of the power one opposes’ (1999: 2). She also discusses the idea of ‘performed’ identities, that aspects of our identity (particularly gender in Butler’s work) are not real, but the way in which we act them out creates an illusion of identity. Butler advocates for performances which challenge, rather than re-enforce these categorisations. This is similar to accounts of identity in discourse theory, where identity is politically constructed, with particular identities provided by competing discourses. This has been applied to Surveillance Studies (Barnard-Wills 2012: 74-5). This paper will explore how artists engaging with surveillance and dataveillance attempt to negotiate the apparent tension between the restrictions placed on the ability to ‘perform’ identity (e.g. government registers, banks), in contrast with the internet’s purported ability to host and enhance performed identities (e.g. blogs, social media). We say purported because whilst such platforms may seem to offer the potential for individual identity expression, this is not to say that they are not overcoded with many forms of surveillance potential, as has been identified by numerous authors (Beer 2009; Wills and Reeves 2009; Trottier 2011).

Clarke describes surveillance as ‘the systematic investigation or monitoring of the actions or communications of one or more persons. Its primary purpose is generally to collect information about them, their activities, or their associates’ (1998: 500). A subset of surveillance, dataveillance is ‘the systematic use of personal data systems in the investigation or monitoring of the actions or communications of one or more persons’ (1998: 500). Dataveillance is a comparatively cheap surveillance technology (being both automatatable and scalable), enabling both government agencies and private companies to collect increasing amounts of electronic data on individuals. A predicted dataveillance trend is that, as the capacity of computer technologies expands, data sets held by different organisations and political entities will be more easily integrated, creating more complete data profiles of individuals, ‘for reasons of employment, security, entertainment, and consumerism’(Clarke 1988: 501). Raab asserts that
the information systems and processes associated with dataveillance are ‘involved in the complex shaping and negotiation of identities; they are developed in all paths, for different purposes’ (2009: 233). In contrast to theoretical post-structural conceptions of identity in use in art historical criticism, these technologies attempt to categorise people by very fixed definitions, which often privilege categories distinct from those conventionally challenged by feminist and post-feminist criticism (race, gender, class), such as medical, financial, consumer or criminal history. Raab explains that, ‘Institutional and social power includes the ability of others to assign identities to individuals or groups authoritatively, and to reduce the ability of the latter to contest or reject these attributions’ (2009: 242). Haggerty and Ericson identify a corresponding increase in the importance of aspects of identity as ‘the population itself is now increasingly transformed into signifiers for a multitude of organized surveillance systems’ (2000: 605). They look to the work of Deleuze and Guattari to develop the concept of the ‘surveillant assemblage’, which ‘operates by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows. These flows are then reassembled into distinct ‘data doubles’ which can be scrutinized and targeted for intervention’ (2000: 606). Finally, Poster terms this and other processes as the ‘cultural externalisation of identity’ (Poster 2007). These concepts are critical to understanding both the abstraction of identities by dataveillance, and the importance of considering artistic works which attempt to conceive of and explore identities abstracted in this way.

Although, as Raab argues, ‘the legitimacy of anonymity is strongly challenged, and opportunities for its exercise may become restricted’ (2009: 233) the expansion in online technologies has also enabled people to create new and additional identities online, to express and create qualitative data (via blogs, conversations, interactions) that, although perhaps the subject of dataveillance, does not yet enable categorisation as part of larger dataset in quite the same ways. The apparent freedom from categories of this exploration and creation of online identities by individuals contrasts sharply with the issues of power and control in the external definition of identities by organisations and political entities where, ‘the selection of criteria for asserting, assigning, or discrediting identities is political, in the broad sense that power is exercised in their application, or in their denial, and that these processes may be the sites of conflict’ (2009: 231). This is not to say that qualitative expressions are not susceptible to surveillant reappropriation or later exploitation. Social networks are so designed and structured that they are arguably closer to the former than the latter. We would place platforms such as Facebook further towards the constrained and externally determined form of identity, given their capacity for surveillance, and also their entrance into the very same identity ‘markets’ as other database providers (Garfinkel 2011).

Regarding surveillance, Ingram conceptualises artistic practice as ‘not just as a form of resistance, refusal or critique but as an index of and contributor to political and spatial transformation’ (2011: 218). The extent to which surveillance theorists utilise literature and popular culture to explore issues within their discipline is surprising. As Albrechtslund and Dubbeld note, many surveillance scholars borrow (often relatively uncritically) from representations of surveillance in popular culture (2005: 220). There is a desire to draw upon cultural accounts as a source of disruption and questioning (Amoore 2009: 17). Such potential may also be emerging in James Bridle’s work on the New Aesthetic. Bridle started collecting images on the blog www.booktwo.org of what he felt were the eruptions of the digital into the physical, a strange combination of interaction design, computational aesthetics, covert surveillance and military technology—drone strikes posted to Instagram, camouflage designed to frustrate digital cameras, and state militaries maintaining promotional pages on Pinterest. Bruce Sterling identifies the ‘relentless surveillance machine’ of contemporary London as part of the New Aesthetics origin. He suggests that the New Aesthetic is a design fiction, a postulated creative position:

By metaphorically pretending that machines are friendly, we can see what they ‘see’ and think about what they ‘think’. We do get a payoff for that effort. We achieve creative results that we would not have gotten without the robot disguise. (Sterling 2012)
Although it is too early, to say, there are likely some important insights for surveillance theory in such creative design fictions.

Torin Monahan’s editorial on surveillance as cultural practice argues that surveillance is inherently embedded in specific cultural contexts and calls for greater understanding of people’s engagement with surveillance (Monahan 2011). Whilst incredibly valid, this perspective cannot, however, ignore the institutional-level power dynamics present in the art world in terms of economic or cultural capital and its circulation, or in the dynamics of art historical scholarship. These dynamics might be missed in interdisciplinary borrowing. Secondly, there are very real problems that certain forms of surveillance, particularly dataveillance, are, as we will argue, quite antithetical to significant forms of cultural production. Currently our narrative reservoirs, or our collective ideoscapes (Brighenti 2010) for making sense of surveillance are filled to overflowing with visual metaphors. If we rely on this then it limits the possibility of disruption and questioning, leaving us with repeating tired metaphors. Therefore we advocate the cultural study of surveillance and situate this article within the ongoing ‘loose conversation’ between Surveillance Studies and artists, but with appropriate caution over disciplinary interaction.

The human form in artistic engagements with surveillance and identity

Discussing surveillance themes in popular media, Marx notes that, ‘The images we hold of surveillance methods are incomplete and partially independent of the technology per se’ (Marx 1996: 193). The way in which we understand how these technologies function is often radically different from what they actually do. Marx’s work analysing modern and contemporary Western music also indicates a privileging of watching, the subject / body, and the viewer / eye. In looking at political illustrations and the visual culture of surveillance Marx notes, ‘The best known visual symbol of surveillance is the eye, followed by the ear’ (1996: 210). In one notable exception Marx describes prevalent illustrations of an individual’s ‘data shadow’ as silhouetted bodies or heads filled with ‘data’. Marx argues that this kind of depiction, ‘suggests new meanings of the self or personhood’ (1996: 213). Haggerty and Ericson’s discussion of the body within the surveillant assemblage mirrors this statement; ‘Today, however, we are witnessing the formation and coalescence of a new type of body, a form of becoming which transcends human corporeality and reduces flesh to pure information’ (2000: 613).

Despite editorial assertions that Ctrl [Space] ‘sought to explore the entire range of “Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother”, i.e. from the paradigmatic nation of controlled space articulated in the architectural model of the panopticon to the new episteme of control in state of the art dataveillance’ (Levin et al. 2001: 13), the exhibition itself focused on the video camera and physical space, rather than information and data. The essays in the exhibition catalogue express an interest in dataveillance not matched by artworks in the exhibition. Although not made explicit, it is possible that the curators simply could not find artistic works that dealt with dataveillance. At the start of the 21st century surveillance had garnered comparatively little attention from the art world, as Levin explains: ‘with the exception of a handful of small gallery shows, there had never been a systematic museum overview of this important body of work’ (Levin et al. 2001: 13). This marks a lag between social and computer science’s understanding of the importance of dataveillance and artistic representations and criticism. Ten years later, Exposed still shows a concern with individuals, but we would argue that the prevalence of the human form and CCTV cameras is attributable to curatorial choice of focus. Curated by Sandra Phillips, Senior Curator of Photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in contrast to Ctrl [Space], the focus of Exposed was very clearly the photographic medium, with watched and watcher interpreted in a very physical sense. There is also no explicit discussion of dataveillance in the accompanying catalogue (Philips 2010: 6). This disconnect between the realities of surveillance, and the devices frequently used in artistic representations of the subject, is perhaps unsurprising given the privileged position of depictions of the human form within Western art, and the difficulty of representing non-visual phenomena. In the Ctrl [Space] catalogue, Ernst astutely asserts that, ‘When bodies merge with data, they become invisible...'
when bodies become mathematically addressable, they enter digital, non-visual space (which is less attractive for museum exhibitions)’ (2001: 463).

Many other artistic contributions, such as the DECONference (Mann, Fung, Federman and Bacciano 2003), Alison Jackson’s ongoing engagement with the subjects of celebrity surveillance and voyeurism, Manu Luksch’s work on The Faceless Project (www.ambienttv.net/pdf/facelessproject.pdf), the Institute for Applied Autonomy’s i-see (www.appliedautonomy.com/isee.html) and of course the New York Surveillance Camera Players, also operate primarily in the register of depictions of the human figure under visual surveillance. Brighenti’s (2010) survey of a number of pieces of surveillance art also demonstrates this. Although operating in a number of registers or moods from the critical to the playful, the works are primarily CCTV inspired or focused, and often depictions of the human body, moving or located in space. The separation of identity from the body within surveillance and information technologies is the subject of debate for academics across a variety of fields. Foucault stated that, ‘Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self recognition or as a basis for understanding other men’ (1984: 63). Hall questions this statement, not because the body is such a stable and true referent for self understanding, but because, though this may be a ‘misrecognition’, it is precisely how the body has served to function as the signer of the condensation of subjectivities in the individual and this function cannot simply be dismissed just because, as Foucault effectively shows, it is not true (Hall 2003: 11). Both Van der Ploeg (2002) and Conrad (2009) demonstrate that there clearly is powerful surveillance of the body, through biometrics, lie detectors and ‘intent detection’, and that these surveillance systems put particular normative pressure on non-normative (e.g., transgender or queer) bodies (Conrad 2009: 381).

Although the body may be an important signer of identity, it is only important due to the ease with which it acts as such. The body as signer is misleading, and the condensation and construction of identities through online engagement and interaction highlights this fact. Schmidt-Burkhardt’s statement that, ‘The ties between vision and the eye are therefore irrevocably severed’, hints at the surveillance of the unseen and invisible within society (Schmidt-Burkhardt 2001).

Although Amoore and Hall are focused on artistic interventions into physical, politicised border spaces, we can draw parallels with artworks included in this paper; ‘they remind us of what we do not pay attention to, what we are distracted from’ (2010: 313).’ The multiplicity of representations of the human form, and use of CCTV cameras in contemporary art reinforce our distraction from the iceberg of dataveillance, sitting just below the waterline. Sweeny notes that ‘Contemporary surveillance technologies increasingly operate in the spaces beyond sight’ (Sweeny 2005: 240).

Beyond the human form in artistic engagements with surveillance and identity

The ten works identified within this paper, which deal with issues of identity and surveillance without relying on the human form, can be seen to fall within three categories. Firstly, those that capture the tools and institutions associated with dataveillance. Secondly, those concerned with the process and practice of institutional and governmental dataveillance. And, thirdly, those that engage with surveillance of qualitative data created by individuals using online technologies as a medium of expression. We will engage with them in this order, whilst providing a description of each artwork, alongside its particular importance for informing art-historical and surveillance theory. At the time of writing this selection of works was relatively complete, but it is likely that this area will prompt further artistic interventions.

Edgerton’s Pentagon and Norfolk’s BBC World Service Atlantic Relay Station both show the apparatus and institutions associated with dataveillance. These photographs play with the idea of watching the watcher. Although taken in the 1940s, Edgerton’s aerial shot of one of the most notorious US surveillance institutions from above prefigures today’s readily available satellite technology and tracking systems.
Norfolk’s image of the faint and almost intangible wiring and masts of the relay station shows the imposition of an ordered set of lines against a rugged, natural sky. These images remind us of the presence of global surveillance systems, but do not engage the viewer in deeper debates about how these impact upon individuals. They do not reveal the process of the results of dataveillance, and are as much about what they do not and cannot show, as about what they do. Stih and Schnock’s typographic work could be seen to bridge the depiction of apparatus and institutions, and of practice and process of dataveillance. Their works *We must demand of the Citizens a Sacrifice* and *Schleyer-Konsorton* highlight the range of surveillance and dataveillance practices in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1970s. Their accompanying essay notes, ‘The accumulation of a vast collection of data in the computers of the police force, the intelligence agencies, and the BKA automatically infringed on disinterested parties’ right of privacy and stirred up fears of a police state’ (Stih and Schnock 2001c: 191). Their essay also outlines the rights enshrined in law that enable, ‘the individual to fundamentally determine whether personal data concerning him should be released and how it should be used’ (2001c). Albrechtslund and Dubbeld draw attention to Surveillance Studies’ concern with highlighting the threatening, controlling aspects of surveillance, contrasting with recent academic works that cite its caring and socially beneficial aspects. They examine the potential for play and entertainment through surveillance, encouraging an understanding of the ‘multi-faceted nature of surveillance’. They note the similarity with artists’ perspectives on surveillance, which tend to focus on controversial aspects of surveillance practices or revealing the operation of surveillance technologies’ (2005: 217). There certainly does appear to be a desire from the artists discussed in this paper to both confront the more shocking or threatening aspects of surveillance (at least from their perspectives), and to enable audiences to engage, participate and play with the works themselves. In Stih and Schnock’s works, the written lists of the data sets being collected, and the questions being asked of friends, neighbours and co-workers, evoke the fear and oppressiveness of a society being closely watched and monitored. Although visually basic, the choice of colours and backgrounds for the text fluctuates between institutional beiges, greens and browns, and bare concrete. *We must demand of the Citizens a Sacrifice* is the most emotive of the two pieces, creating a collective monologue where fictional neighbours list their interpretation of ‘suspicious’ behaviour from one or a number of the surrounding families.

We would argue that art works which remove the ‘placebo’ of a central depiction of the visual ‘self’ / human form are more able to expose the de-humanising process of being reduced to set data and definitions. Haggerty and Ericson quite rightly contrast the ‘deep subjective nuances’ of real world relations with family and friends with, ‘discrete bits of information which break the individual down into flows for purposes of management, profit and entertainment’ (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 619). Both of Toot’s installations, *Memopol-land* and *Memopol-2*, reconstruct exactly this experience. They scan the identification documents of audience members, and bring up a variety of personal data available on them, gradually populating a large display screen area with personal data ranging from performance at school, to earnings, to access to healthcare (facilitated by the interconnectivity of the Estonia e-ID card). Similarly, the Builders Association’s (2005) performance piece *Super Vision* melded visual projections of data with theatre to evoke the way in which dataveillance is a part of everyday life. This piece uses actors and projections to put the human, interactive aspects of technology into sharp contrast with its prescriptive, data based elements. Hall describes identities as, ‘the result of a successful articulation or ‘ chaining’ of the subject into the flow of the discourse’ (Hall 2003: 6). In *Super Vision* this chaining and linking is almost literal, with individuals interactions and choices instigated and influenced by datasets, and chains of information. Matheson argues that, within an automated system, the ‘non-reflexive’ nature of self identification is in itself an invasion of privacy, ‘By depersonalizing those persons who are authenticated by the system, the system itself shrinks the opportunity for us to develop a robust dignity’ (Matheson 2009: 211). The sense of loss of self and control over what is conceived of as your identity is made very real for audiences interacting with these works. These art works may not expand upon Surveillance Studies theory, but they do more accurately reflect it than the majority of clichéd cultural references regularly used in the field such as Big Brother, the Panopticon, and grainy video of CCTV. They also
bring an awareness of how dataveillance can construct, limit and mis-represent identities to a wider audience, the majority of whom are unfamiliar with surveillance theory. This brings us back to Butler’s assertion in *Gender Trouble* that we should seek to de-stabilise categories associated with identities, such as gender. To challenge and potentially de-stabilise the new and multiple categories imposed upon us by dataveillance we must first understand them and consider the difference between the identity that they construct, and that which we understand to be a truer representation of ourselves.

Clarke notes ‘the difficulties of reliably identifying surveillance subjects, in associating stored data with individuals, and in associating new data with old’ (1988: 507). Although humorous in approach, Marnix de Nijs’ *Physiognomic Scrutinizer* highlights very real concerns of inaccuracies and mis-identification within dataveillance, and the subject’s lack of power in contesting these. The installation uses facial recognition to scan the features of audience members as they walk through a metal-detector style gateway. Participants’ faces are matched to the most similar face from a database of notorious celebrities, public figures and criminals. A voice then reads out the name of the person they have been deliberately mis-identified as, citing all of the crimes, misdemeanours and deviant behaviours that the figure has been accused or convicted of.

In contrast to the limitations placed upon identity by organisational dataveillance, Clothier discusses the internet as ‘an entirely suitable place to manufacture a hybrid cultural identity’ (2005: 44). Rogers notes that, ‘the Foucauldian subjects of surveillance now own and use consumer technology, which makes them unruly’ (2008: 288). He argues that the consumer may ‘try to reassert his idiosyncrasy, becoming less like consumer shop-alikes, or algorithmically social networkers with related interest tags, and more a unique, special individual’ (2008: 291). Describing the developing culture of virtual worlds, Turkle describes a virtual world of self-assumed screen identities that provides ‘worlds for anonymous social interactions in which one can play a role as close to or as far away from one’s “real self” as one chooses’ (Turkle 1996), although she has recently moved away from the optimism of this position (Turkle 2011). This freedom and anonymity is evoked by Chatonsky’s *Le Registre—The Register* and Rubin and Hansen’s *Listening Post*. *Listening Post* uses over two hundred electronic screens, suspended from the ceiling of the exhibition space to display text taken, in real time, from online discussion threads, chat rooms, and public forums. The texts are read out loud to the audience by a computer generated voice. The immediate impression of this large scale work is the overwhelming quantity of different things being communicated across global digital networks. The work very effectively simulates the diversity and volume of independent, individual expression, of people’s assertion of their own identities, tied to their thoughts and expressions made public over the internet. This is not the stuff of organisational dataveillance, which relies upon categorisation of individuals by specific datasets but is currently looking at ways to consistently categorise and monitor the proliferation of the fluid range of individual online expression. This type of data can, of course, be surveilled, however it reduces the act of surveillance to that of the individual, rather than categorisation of national and global customers and populations. Upon first seeing Chatonsky’s *Le Registre—The Register* you would not immediately associate it with a work such as the *Listening Post*. Although also an installation, it appears to be no more than a white bookshelf filled with entirely white covered hardbacks, with a ledge beneath it for resting books removed from the shelf. Although its exterior is visually quiet, and seemingly non-descript, the process of the work’s creation is not. Chatonsky explains that:

> a software gathers feelings found on blogs. These feelings are recorded in a database. From the database is automatically created a book of 500 pages every hour. If requested, the book can be printed. Every day, the books are gathered in sets of 24 and incorporated to an infinite library.

(Chatonsky 2007)
The work can be read as a metaphor for both the internal feelings and lives of individuals, the way in which these individuals play out their identities through the non-tangible medium of the internet, and the role of a third party aggregating data for their own (in this case artistic) purposes. These works explore the conception of identity asserted by Sweeny;

the notion that online identity is fluid; race, gender, and sexuality are easily morphed...the ability for individuals to modify identity is a visible manifestation of the notion of fragmentation that has accompanied a shift to a postmodernist era. The ability for an individual to assume any number of identities in online interaction seems to counteract the potential for surveillance technologies to normalize behaviour, to force individuals into binary positions as previously discussed.

(2005: 248)

Although small in number, the artworks discussed have proven to be very effective at evoking and engaging with different issues of surveillance and identity. The more interactive works benefit from the input of software and hardware specialists who worked with the artists to create works in mediums which utilise or simulate systems and sites of dataveillance. These collaborations have enabled works to engage with audiences, sometimes in literally interactive ways, whilst still moving away from the dominating themes within surveillance art of the human form and CCTV camera. The importance of these works should not be underestimated given the extent of dataveillance and its growing significance in the lives of people worldwide, set against the over-used and prevailing depictions of non-data based surveillance which permeate the art world, surveillance discourse, popular and media culture.

Identity within art history and surveillance theory

Super Vision, Le Registre—The Register, Physiognomic Scrutinizer, Listening Post, Schleyer-Konsorton, Memopol-1, and Memopol-2 all make use of computer software to create works which investigate issues of identity in relation to dataveillance. Interactivity and performance are also central to the works listed above; even Listening Post uses real time data created by people outside of the gallery, and Schleyer-Konsorton requires active use as a CD-ROM listing surveillance techniques and data. Stiles asserts that, ‘The use of technology has also shifted attention to electronically mediated and enhanced bodies, highlighting the trope of interactivity that has adhered throughout twentieth century art, which is a fundamental point of intersection between performance and kinetic art’ (2003: 87).

Butler asks, ‘is “the body” itself shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex?’ (2009: 465). We would argue that when we remove, abstract or do not privilege the physical, as in dataveillance, where some facets of identity and difference are no longer visibly apparent, that concerns with other areas of identity and difference might well come to the fore. Broader and more varied concerns in relation to power, control and identity, such as what happens to identity when the interests and methods of both power and populace move beyond the body into the virtual? Amoore asserts that ‘The claims that visualizations used in place of “face-to-face” pictures avoid racial profiling and other prejudicial judgements cannot be upheld. It is always through the visualization of the identity of the “other” that the sanctity of “we the nation”, “we the people” is sustained’ (2009: 24). However there is more potential for flux between the importance placed on categories of identification depending on the organisational and political use of data, though the power to decide which categories are prioritised remains firmly in the hands of the state or organisation.

Kerr, Lucock and Steeves argue that, ‘new technologies that have the potential to rewrite what it means to be human will raise interesting questions about who we are’ (2009: 210). The works discussed in this essay negotiate the new issues of identity within a surveillance society, a path that needs to be followed by contemporary art historical theory. As Jenkins points out, dataveillance’s rigid methods of capturing
identity is, ‘in tension with current social theories of identity, where identity is always social, always a process, a linguistic capacity and never settled or fixed’ (2004: 17). The art works reflect this divergence in their decision to engage with fluid, created identities and restricted and defined data profiles.

Meyer asserts that, ‘In many cases, approaching the history of art through the lens of identity has served to highlight a category of social difference that had been marginalised, underrepresented, or otherwise ignored by earlier scholarship’ (2003: 345). However, in terms of understanding the boundaries of identities and social differences, Butler argues that, ‘The political terms that are meant to establish a secure or coherent identity are troubled by this failure of discursive performativity to finally and fully establish the identity to which it refers’ (1993:118). Writing at the same time as Butler, Meyer recognises that, ‘Even at those moments when individuals openly embrace a particular form of identity, they may also experience a countervailing desire to be seen as something else or something more’ (2003: 356).

We might be at the point where a paradigm shift in the understanding of identity in art theory is needed, due to the engagement with the alternate forms of dataveillance identity (Pollock 2008: xxiii). The ability to create identity is explored by Butler, but not in relation to new technologies and the art works that have responded to and utilised these, where they can be contrasted with those works that also highlight the limitations which can be imposed. Hall notes the deconstruction of the concept of identity, ‘conducted within a variety of disciplinary areas, all of them, in one way or another critical of the notion of an integral, originary and unified identity’ (Hall 2003: 1). However, Hall argues that since the concepts of identity have not been, ‘superseded dialectically’, we must continue to use them in, ‘detotalised or deconstructed forms, and no longer operating within the paradigm in which they were originally generated’ (2003: 1). This approach recognises identification as both an incompletable process and a construct. As much as we agree with Hall that this aspect of modern society has fragmented traditional concepts of identity (related to place and culture), other contemporary phenomena re-consolidate conceptions of identity, such as the definitions set and used by international datasets utilised by Memopol-1 and Memopol-2. We do not argue that these data sets constitute a ‘real’ or ‘true’ identity, but neither were other theoretical conceptions of identity ‘real’ or ‘true’. Indeed, these conceptions of identity are all constructs that wield power and control over the individuals categorised. As Butler states:

One is still constituted by discourse, but at a distance from oneself. Interpellation is an address that regularly misses its mark. It requires the recognition of an authority at the same time that it confers identity through successfully compelling that recognition. Identity is a function of that circuit, but does not preexist it.

(Butler 1997: 33)

In Vision and Difference Pollock explores artistic engagement with post structuralist theories, as with the works examined in this essay that both highlight and contradict qualitative dataveillance’s intersection with individual’s identities, ‘their difference lies precisely in negating the knowledges and ideologies which are dominant and have become normalised’ (2008: 251). These art works are important because they challenge these normalised understanding of identity as the physical body. Brubaker and Cooper are clear that the way in which politically or organisationally constructed categorisations may shape the way we understand ourselves is a subject in need of empirical research. We support their statement that, ‘The language of “identity” is more likely to hinder than to help the posing of such questions, for it blurs what needs to be kept distinct: external categorization and self-understanding, objective commonality and subjective groupness’ (2000: 27). The art works discussed in this essay help to develop our understanding of these intersections, or at least prompt critical dialogue that may lead to a new language, and way of understanding identity in the age of dataveillance, online creation and performance.
Conclusions

Identity is complex, both shifting and multifaceted. Although current scholarship recognises this, the majority of artistic practice that explores surveillance looks at traditional, corporeal issues of identity, utilising images and footage of people. In focusing on the most prevalent arts practice, art historical criticism has not been able to test these new theoretical ideas about identity on artistic works that engage more fully with the complex, modern conceptions and issues of identity. By critically examining art works that attempt to explore issues of identity cast through the contemporary lens of data surveillance, we have found that they engage with issues of identity in a way that is closer to recent critical conceptions of identity, and new ways in which identity can be constructed, limited and created online, although are tellingly not without their own surveillance potential. Art historical scholarship could be further modified and enhanced by a deeper understanding of both the issues surrounding dataveillance and identity, and by contemporary arts practice in this area. For Surveillance Studies this is important because it offers the potential for new narrative and interpretive reservoirs, with the potential to challenge new and emergent cultures of surveillance, to response to new technologies and new social arrangements, and even to support research dissemination.

References


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