Article

Performing, Translating, Fashioning: Spectatorship in the Surveillant World

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Abstract

Despite the disciplinary power of surveillance, I argue artistic performances may also provide a space of resistance and self-fashioning. Discussions on artistic performance emphasize the ambivalence and uncertainty of art to resist existing power structures and create alternative meaning. However, how concretely, and when, do artistic performances challenge these structures often remains uncertain. Their popularity does not guarantee the depth of their engagement with surveillance practices, and apparent resistance may hide blatant reproduction of existing inequalities and power structures. To understand the political effect of artistic performances, I argue one needs to look at how they participate to the redefinition of individual and collective selves. This must include attention to spectatorship as a different category from state and corporate surveillance. Spectators actively engage with performers, reinforce or deny their claim to self-fashioning. By looking at spectators we can better understand how a performance can be (or fail to be) self-fashioning not only for the performer but also for the spectators.

*An emancipated community is in fact
a community of storytellers and translators.*
Jacques Rancière

Introduction: The Uncertainty of Artistic Performances

If surveillance reproduces inequalities and heteronormativity (Lyon 2003; Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015), some have explored how appearance and monitored performances can also be used for creative self-transformation, underscoring people's agency rather than submission to power structures (McGrath 2004; Finn 2012; Phillips 2015). Performance, the playful engagement with seeing, being seen and choosing (at least partially) what is to be seen and how one is to be seen, can transform appearances into meaningful appropriations of a space of visibility that allow self-fashioning. In a context where surveillance practices tend to reduce people to economic variables to be exploited or potential security threats to be tamed (Andrejevic 2007; Amoore 2009; Amoore and de Goede 2005; Monahan 2006), imagining how surveillance practices and appearance can also be an avenue for individual and collective self-determination is refreshing.

Discussions on the creative agency of artistic performance emphasize the subversive power and indeterminacy of art as the enabler of this space of resistance (McGrath 2012; Brighenti 2010). Re-appropriating through art the tools of surveillance in ambivalent, unexpected fashion allows questioning existing power structures and creating alternative meaning (McGrath and Sweeny 2010). Central thus is

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the idea of uncertainty. Inserting uncertainty into power structures challenges their apparent naturalness, reminds the contingency of social structures and invites to imagine the world differently.

However, as some have indicated, how concretely, and when, do artistic performances challenge actual power structures also remains uncertain. The popularity and hipness of art do not guarantee the depth of its engagement with surveillance practices. Apparent resistance may hide blatant reproduction of existing inequalities and power structures (Monahan 2015). Understanding the effect of an artistic performance's uncertainty is undoubtedly complex (Edkins and Kear 2013; Shapiro 2013). Refusing to directly come to grips with this question risks fetishizing artistic performance into something it is not and cannot be: an uncontested form of permanent resistance.

Still, this should not be read as the confession that artistic performances are no more than mirages, unable to deliver the space of political agency that they wish to be. On the contrary, it is believed, in line with aesthetic theory, that they can offer valuable sites of self-fashioning. The challenge thus is to conceptualize a way for understanding their political effect rather than ontologically positing it. For Louise Amoore and Alexandra Hall, art is a "catalyst" to imagining new modes of being (Amoore and Hall 2010: 311). It can trigger or accelerate imagination and as such possesses a critical role. But as a trigger, its effect is also limited. To make sense of artistic performances' political relevance, one must go beyond the interpretation of the catalysts and look at what came out from them.

This exploration of artistic performances asks what is to be self-fashioned. The proposed answer is double: the individual and the collectivity. Consequently, to understand the political effect of artistic performances, one needs to look at how they participate to the redefinition of selves. To do so, I argue analyses of artistic performances must include attention to spectatorship. I look at three such performances—the collective twitter campaign *#myNYPDfile*, Julian Oliver's and Danja Vasiliev's *PRISM: The Beacon Frame*, and Hasan Elahi's *Tracking Transience*—to show how appearing can contribute (or not) to performers' and spectators' self-determination. However, before I explore these performances, I first turn to a discussion of artistic resistance to surveillance. Deepening the relation between performance, counter/visuality, art and spectatorship helps understanding the avenues and limits of this form of critical intervention.

Countervisuality, Performance and Watchful Eyes: Bringing Spectatorship to Life

In today's surveillance societies the permanent presence of watchful eyes is now a common feature that transforms our everyday into monitored performances. In homes, schools, games, workplaces, public spaces, communication networks, surveillance has become ubiquitous (Lyon 2001; Regan and Steeves 2010; Monahan 2006; Katz 2008; Ellerbrok 2011; Whitson and Simon 2014). Innumerable small brothers watch for ill or good the daily waltz of intermingling bodies. They monitor performances and code them into meaningful categories recreating through each and every gaze existing social structures and along them reinforcing privileges and exclusions. However, performance can also constitute a form of resistance or space of self-fashioning. Performance, and artistic performances, play with the social power of seeing and proposes alternative meanings to bodies.

Torin Monahan explores this relation between performance, government and resistance (Monahan 2015). He reminds us, through his attention to visibility and countervisuality, that seeing is not neutral, but a constitutive part of governmental practices. Following Nicholas Mirzoeff (Mirzoeff 2011), Monahan defines visibility as:

the normalization of state control through techniques of classification, separation, and aestheticization, which enforce a kind of reductive, exclusionary legibility. ... [I]t manifests in a set of extractive and dehumanizing complexes ... that are institutionalized through bureaucratic and scientific apparatuses that render classifications true and population governable (Monahan 2015: 2).

Visuality classifies bodies into “natural” or “normal” racial, gender or economic categories, into included or excluded populations that are then governed accordingly: left to their death, relegated to the margins or privileged (Mirzoeff 2011). Significant here is that visibility, by naturalizing these categories, grants or denies agency. In opposition, countervisuality projects perform the “right to look back”. They seek both autonomy from a visibility that claims authority over reality, over “that-which-must-be-made-sense-of” (Pasolini in Mirzoeff 2011: 477), and the recognition of one’s existence as an autonomous being, prior to how he might be categorized.

Artistic performances, Monahan argues, offer valuable spaces of resistance to dominant visualities as they “can serve an important role in disrupting ... exclusionary logics in societies” (Monahan 2015: 15). In the context of surveillance, Monahan argues countervisuality projects need to challenge both the naturalization of identities and the practices of surveillance that, although indiscriminate in scope, are nonetheless in reality targeting some more than others. Nevertheless, despite the possibilities offered by art, Monahan remains far from apologetic. Artistic performances that refuse to engage directly with the discriminatory logic of current surveillance inevitably fail at challenging the crux of the problem. It reproduces the myth of universal and equally distributed surveillance that leaves out of sight the reality of surveillance that disproportionately targets marginalized populations (Monahan 2015: 14; Monahan 2010: 128-144).

In that sense, Monahan argues that meaningful artistic interventions must fully engage with the political and seek to destabilize the present social order, what Rancière names the police. The police orders the distribution of the sensible, i.e. the fields of experience that define the shared common and the exclusive parts and roles of groups and individuals. As a corollary, it leaves part of reality unseen and inaudible. Politics resists this order. In opposition to the “logic of the police ... [that] distributes bodies within the space of visibility ... political acts ... shift bodies from the places assigned to them, thus making visible ‘what have no business being seen’” (Norval 2014: 198-199). This moment of rupture is not intended to be purely objective, “as there is no outside of the police” (Rancière in Norval 2014: 204), but subjective. For Rancière,

[p]olitics is a matter of subjects or, rather, modes of subjectification ... the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience (Rancière 1999: 35).

Importantly, politics, by staging the declaration of a wrong and the recognition of one’s declaration, creates new political subjects: the parties in the conflict (Rancière 1999: 27). These subjects and subjectivities are not fixed as they do not precede the declaration of a wrong, but are relational, contingent on the political moment (Chambers 2009: 11). Thus artistic interventions engaging the political challenge the apparent normality of the attributed parts and roles, and the subjectivities it creates and on which it relies. In parallel, they produce a space of appearance for new subjects.

Here, I argue that the appearing subject of politics should not be understood in a narrow sense. For Rancière, political acts reveal both the miscounted parts declaring a wrong and the parts counted in the police order. With this in mind, following performance and theatre theory, I argue that a performance-as-political act brings forth not only the performer-as-political subject, but also the watcher: the spectator

(Edkins and Kear 2013; Graham 2005: 149-163; Davis 2008). The performance creates a space where both performer and audience are present and visible (although in different terms). In a sense, this is not a revolutionary proposal as the ambiguous and complex relation between watched and watcher has already been discussed (McGrath 2012). However, I want to invite reflection on the fact that the watchers are not always and/or only the state and corporate surveillant eyes. Artistic performances, most-notably, expect another set of eyes: spectators.

For Adrian Kear, art is composed of three elements: an artistic act that shows the presence of the artist, the institutional frame and context of the exhibition that set the parameters for the appearance of the artistic act and, most importantly, that create a “space of encounter” with the third element: the spectator (Kear 2013: 20). For Kear, this triangular relation must be understood as a “*theatrical* exposure”. As the stage invites a public, art brings into presence spectators. “Without this gesture towards the spectator’s co-appearance in the scene”, Kear reminds us, “... the image itself would not be given to be seen” (Kear 2013: 20). For Kear, this space of encounter makes the politics of art possible.

This tripartite definition of art allows thinking the political ontology of artistic performances in relational terms. It brings the performer and spectators together into the world. However, this aesthetic encounter does not systematically happen. For Kear, two conditions are necessary for the encounter to happen: artistic practices that reflect on the relation between presence and modes of representation, and the creative engagement of spectators (Kear 2013: 22-25). Where these conditions are realized, a disruptive aesthetic encounter is possible. The political effect of art thus becomes dependent, in part, on an active spectator engaging with the performance.

The active spectator of art, however, is opposed to the traditional understanding of spectatorship. Thinking through theatre theory where the relation with the spectator is said to be constitutive of theatre, Rancière observes the “paradox of the spectator”. “There is no theatre without spectators”, but at the same time spectatorship is denigrated, established on the foundational inequalities between looking and knowing, appearance and reality, passivity and activity, and ultimately incapacity and capacity (Rancière 2007: 271-2). Part of the distribution of the sensible, these oppositions participate to “the configuration of domination and subjection” (Rancière 2007: 277). This understanding of spectatorship leaves theatre in an uncomfortable position: it becomes responsible for the passivity of its spectators.

As a consequence, it sets itself the task of reversing its own effect and compensating for its own guilt by giving back to the spectators their self-consciousness or self-activity. ... They present to the collective audience performances intended to teach the spectators how they can stop being spectators and become performers of a collective activity (Rancière 2007: 274).

The problem with this mission is the assumption that spectatorship is a passive activity and that it is theatre’s function to teach its spectators what they do not, but should know. Rancière argues that this pedagogical transmission of knowledge that theatre reproduces is fundamentally unequal. It postulates the ignorance of the student/spectator, and his ignorance of his ignorance. Before him, the schoolmaster/theatre knows this ignorance, and knows how to suppress the distance from ignorance to knowledge. In this process, the primary knowledge the student/spectator learns is the knowledge of his incapacity to understand and learn by himself. This process is what Rancière calls stultification and that he opposes to emancipation. Against the inherent inequality of intelligence that pedagogical stultification implies, emancipation is the recognition of the equality of intelligence: “not the equality of all manifestations of intelligence” but the recognition that all processes of learning are similarly done “by observing, comparing one thing with another thing, one sign with one fact, one sign with another sign, and repeating the experiences he has first encountered by chance” (Rancière 2007: 275). In that sense, learning is an active process of translation between what is unknown, what is known and what is to-be known.

Thinking emancipated spectatorship demands that one approaches spectatorship from the concept of equality, refusing the dichotomy between looking and acting. “The spectator is active ... he observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets” and makes his own poem. He does not simply learn this or that lesson that theatre teaches, but translate into his own the theatre’s performance (Rancière 2007: 277). In this intellectual process, the emancipated spectator associates, dissociates, blurs boundaries and hierarchies, and produces a new self in ways that cannot be anticipated.

This is what emancipation means: the blurring of the opposition between those who look and those who act, between those who are individuals and those who are members of a collective body. ... [E]mancipation [is] not about acquiring the knowledge of [one’s] condition. It [is] about configuring a time and a space that invalidat[e] the old distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2007: 279).

Spectatorship becomes a mode of subjectification where the translation of knowledge can disrupt the definitions of subjectivities, parts and roles upon which the distribution of the sensible relies. It offers an opportunity for emancipation, for claiming equality against an unequal police order (Rancière 2007: 278-9). “In this way”, writes Kear, “the theatrical relation may be reconfigured as a mode of dissensual engagement and democratic political participation” (Kear 2013: 29).

Rancière’s emancipated spectator is compelling as it allows including eyes too often ignored when it comes to analyzing the political effect of art. However, in the light of existing discussion on active audience, its emancipatory quality may appear illusory. Audiences are not natural, but constituted categories, objects to be acted upon more than active subjects. Academics, economic and governmental institutions produce audiences to render people governable. When an audience becomes active, for example through industry surveys, internet fan sites or other interactive avenues, this activity is commonly appropriated, transformed into unpaid immaterial labour (Shimpach 2005: 345-356). Being part of an audience thus appears far from emancipatory. The audience becomes the object of asymmetrical relations with states and corporations (Andrejevic 2007). The idea that audience activity can be a relevant form of resistance is also contested. To see resistance in audiences reinterpreting media texts “overexten[ds] readings of resistance, and ... overpoliticiz[es] ... the trivial” (Bratich 2008: 44). Dave Beech offers such a critique of Rancière’s emancipated spectatorship. As Rancière reduces activity to observation, selection, comparison and interpretation, Beech argues he reproduces the “all-too-familiar subjective capacities of the contemplative aesthetic onlooker” and fails to examine the “multifarious processes of emancipatory struggles” (Beech 2010: 10-11). In other words, for Beech, Rancière’s emancipated spectator is not active enough to become effective resistance.

These critiques, however, suffer their own limits. Going against the argument that audiences are only constituted by external actors, Michael Warner argues that “[a] public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. ... It exists *by virtue of being addressed*” (Warner 2002: 67). A public is brought to life by the circulation of discourses among strangers, it “unites strangers through participation” into a social imaginary (Warner 2002: 75). In that sense, the circulation of discourses is doubly performative: it creates a public, and attempts to mould this public. “Its circulatory fate is the realization of that [imagined] world [into the public]. Public discourse says not only ‘Let a public exist’ but ‘Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way’” (Warner 2002: 114). Warner thus recognizes a “poetic world making” power to some publics. If dominant publics simply reproduce the social status quo without questioning it, “[c]ounterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of the scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely” (Warner 2002: 122).

In this context, reducing activity to a source for value extraction or smooth government “fails to capture the specifics of what it means and what might be implied by working and/as watching” (Shimpach 2005: 356). The only meaning it recognizes to audience activity is that of value. It leaves no space for an

unanticipated effect of activity. The refusal to recognize the political power of an active audience on the grounds that it is insufficiently resistant also becomes problematic. Jack Bratich argues that the problem lies precisely in the need to read activity in terms of resistance. “[R]esistance is not a quality of an act, but a category of judgment about acts” (Barker in Bratich 2008: 45). In that sense, resistance is a concept to evaluate the use-value of political acts measured as externality to a political order. Instead of focusing on the resistance/power binary, we need to look at the ontology of the media subject, i.e. on the “way being is constituted by subjects-in-action” (Bratich 2008: 34). Bratich reminds us that “[a]udience’ is a media subject that is embedded in a larger set of subjective processes” (Bratich 2008: 48). As a consequence, we should not objectify audience and try to identify its “predetermined political effects” (Bratich 2008: 47), but look at these subjective processes through which it is produced and produces itself.

By linking the political effect of artistic intervention to the co-presence of spectators and performers, Rancière’s emancipated spectatorship and Kear’s relational ontology of art offer a way to make sense of the media subject, more specifically of the subject of artistic intervention, and how he can constitute himself. However, Rancière’s double definition of emancipation may be confusing. Both “awareness and enactment of that equal power of translation and counter-translation” and “invalida[tion] of the old distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2007), emancipation seems to keep one foot in the resistance rhetoric that Bratich urges us to abandon. Nevertheless, I argue that these two readings of emancipation are reconcilable as they correspond to two different albeit close moments of the spectators’ activity. Recognizing the power of translation of the spectator emancipates him from previous understandings of its passivity, but it offers no “guarantee” that his translation of artistic intervention will oppose the distribution of the sensible. Rancière precisely wants to interrupt this causal link between art and a predetermined political effect by inserting the spectator as an unanticipated translator (Rancière 2007: 280). The first definition of the emancipated spectator is thus an ontological proposition: the recognition that the spectator can translate for his own what he reads and position himself in relation to the distribution of the sensible. But the enactment of this power may not be emancipatory in the sense that he may refuse to challenge the distribution of the sensible. As Kear writes, “spectatorship is a critical activity that *confirms*, contests and changes the ‘distribution of the sensible’ with which it is presented” (Kear 2013: 29; my emphasis). Thus, instead of predetermining the effect of artistic interventions, the co-presence of performers and spectators asks the question: “What are the ethical, political and aesthetic implications of recognizing the co-presence of performer, maker and spectator as being in the world—*this* world—together?” (Kear 2013: 22).

Back into the world of surveillance, the co-presence of performers, spectators and state and corporate surveillance adds to the complexity of the space of self-fashioning. It is not simply the performer who can benefit from the created space but also the spectators. This is not to say that these categories are sealed compartments or that all spectators are benevolent. Some have shown how CCTV operators, the eyes of state and corporate surveillance, have transformed benign public appearances of women into sexualized performances for which they are spectators (Hillier 1996; Koskela 2002). Similarly, counter-surveillance practices, such as Cop Watch’s monitoring of police interventions, blur the line between usual performer and surveiller while at the same time risk catching unexpected spectators in the crossfire (Huey, Walby, and Doyle 2006; Monahan, Phillips, and Murakami Wood 2010: 108-9). In other circumstances, being a spectator of a performance can draw upon the self the attention of state and corporate surveillance. Discussing the New York premiere of Laura Poitras’s *Citizenfour*, art journalist Julia Friedman ponders: “I couldn’t help but wonder if we were all being monitored; Poitras, Greenwald, journalist Jeremy Scahill, and members of Snowden’s family were all present. The event seemed a likely target for enhanced NSA data flagging” (Friedman 2014). In these moments, watching others claiming the “right to look back” may be a dangerous business. Despite these possible limits, I argue that it is by looking at spectators that we can better understand how an artistic performance can be (or fail to be) self-fashioning not only for the performer but also for spectators. I turn to three performances to illustrate how spectatorship can help

better appreciate the potential self-fashioning of monitored performances. Can monitored performances participate in the constitution of communities of storytellers and translators?

Self-Fashioning Performances: Emancipating the Watchers

The three case studies I explore share a common ethos: they are artistic performances resisting current surveillance practices as used by the US security surveillance assemblage, and more specifically the attribution of objectified, threatening identities to groups or individuals. They oppose the arbitrariness of surveillance and the imposition of data doubles that corrupt what they consider to be their true identity. However, they differ in their form and, I argue, in their success in producing spaces for self-fashioning. *#myNYPDfile*, a popular twitter campaign started in reaction to revelations about NYPD surveillance, offers the American Muslim community an opportunity to protest the discrimination it suffers and an opportunity to define a new, non-threatening self. The second project, *PRISM: The Beacon Frame*, wants to make visible secretive state surveillance. To do so, it mimics surveillance practices and exposes its spectators. In the process, however, I argue it reproduces the objectifying gaze of state surveillance and denies its spectators self-determination. Finally, *Tracking Transience* reveals its author's new data double, rejecting the threatening identity that was imposed upon him by the FBI. But this new self exposed in the project is indeterminate. This indeterminacy, I argue, invites further translations that shaken the expected transparent subjectivities of the security order.

#myNYPDfile: A Self-Returning Gaze of Normality

Associated Press revealed in February 2012 that the New York Police Department (NYPD) proceeded to intensive surveillance and cartography of the Muslim community in the Tri-State area—New York, New Jersey and Connecticut (Hawley 2012; Goldman and Apuzzo 2012). In response, Sadia Latifi and Ismat Sarah Mangla threw the idea of *#myNYPDfile*. “Hey, Muslims! (Or anyone, really.)”, asks Mangla on her Twitter account, “If the NYPD had been spying on you, what would they know? Answer with *#myNYPDfile*” (Mangla 2012a). The question spread and people answered in mass. For about a month, the hashtag served as an active space for discussions about surveillance, discrimination and racism in security narratives and practices. It also served as a connector with and propagator of other actions made in opposition to NYPD surveillance and, more precisely, to the profiling and targeting of law-abiding citizens.

However, I argue that there is something more in *#myNYPDfile* than bringing awareness about NYPD surveillance. It provided a space of self-fashioning for a marginalized community. Through humour and irony, people refused common stereotypes, highlighted popular ignorance about Islam and showed the “normality”, even banality of American Muslim lives. The sarcasm expressed in *#myNYPDfile* protests the identification of the Muslim community as a threat to American culture and national security. The tweets highlighted how mundane acts become, when done by Muslim people, source of suspicion. For example, S.R. Hofler tweeted, “Sir, she's lost 15 pounds by working out. She claims its to fit into her old jeans; however we believe its jihadi training *#mynypdfile*” (Hofler 2012). While apparently banal things such as losing weight might completely pass under the radar or be framed as a well-being or feminist issue for “normal” white women, Hofler remarks that for the Muslim community the security frame always comes first. Others talk about the suspicion that surrounds mobility (Rasul 2012; Sandfia 2012), fashion (Ley 2012a; Sarsour 2012b; Rodriguez 2012) or food (Kamz 2012; Halal Train 2012a). What comes back is the idea that, contrary to others, “Muslims [are] guilty until proven innocent” (Ley 2012b). This association with terrorism is felt to be unfounded and the result of ignorance. Tweets such as Bèéd'äh ♡'s, “‘Sir, they keep sayings its ‘Halal & Haram’ I think those are the leaders. We need to bring them in.’ *#myNYPDfile*” (Bèéd'äh 2012), or Omar Ali Khan's “Suspect caught with foot in the sink. Obvious use of toenail fungus to poison water supply. *#myNYPDfile*” (Khan 2012), make fun at common ignorance about the Muslim faith and customs, and bring emphasis on how this ignorance leads to fear of difference.

Against this idea that “Muslims [are] not part of [the American] ‘us’ & all a potential threat” (Fizazi 2012), some have worked to show how “normal” the Muslim community really is, concerned with the same things other Americans are. Muslim people care about school (Hassan 2012; Sérine 2012), nature (Tatiana 2012), TV shows (Mangla 2012b), celebrities (Latifi 2012), video games (Rahim 2012) and good food (Halal Train 2012b). Just like other Americans, they are law-abiding citizens (Rashid 2012; Bahfen 2012). Differences associated with the Muslim faith are shown to be benign and a private rather than public matter. In that sense, they are “normal” Americans. Through *#myNYPDfile*, as Hafsa Arain tweets, “Muslims don’t want special treatment, they just want to be treated like anyone else” (Arain 2012).

With *#myNYPDfile*, people protested the threatening identity ascribed to the American Muslim community. They demanded to be recognized as “normal” Americans and to stop being cast aside. One can better appreciate the significance of this demand when considering both performers and spectators. People participating in the twitter campaign were active both as performers and spectators, tweeting and re-tweeting, writing and reading the developing discussion associated to *#myNYPDfile*. In this context where performers and spectators blur, it is interesting to note that most people who participated in *#myNYPDfile* were Muslim themselves, among them many working as civil liberties and antiracism activists, interfaith educators, or bloggers on the issues of religion, racism and politics. Once one notices this, the popular tweet campaign becomes much narrower in scope, almost self-referential: people pleading their case to themselves, looking in a mirror for approval.

Bringing awareness on NYPD’s abuses might not be the primary objective of *#myNYPDfile*. It rather acts as a catharsis against the frustration of discovering the extent of institutional racism the Muslim community is enduring. Humour is omnipresent and irony distorts the shocking news into ridiculous, decreasing the emotional pressure. As Linda Sarsour writes: “I know y’all think we r crazy but if we don’t find humour in some of these dark injustices we will then really become crazy. *#myNYPDfile*” (Sarsour 2012a). *#myNYPDfile* is the substitute for a fantasy shared among the Muslim community: that of “normality”. Fantasy should not be read as a pejorative word, an impossible “magical” wish. For Sarah Kofman, fantasy is “an account of the author’s history after the fact”, a distorted memory that makes past events easier to bear (Kofman and Kul-Want 2010: 186). As substitutes for a fantasy, *#myNYPDfile* performances free the performers from the affective pain brought by racism, Islamophobia and the refusal to recognize the Muslim community as a “normal” constituent of the American identity. The tweets play with the ignorance and stereotypes that feed the fear of the Muslim community, demonstrate through irony the discriminatory logic of associating so many law-abiding, ordinary people with groups of extremists. In other words, they turn into humour the violence that is projected unto them.

This form of resistance may not lobby representatives or win lawsuits. These things are done elsewhere (NYCLU 2013), sometimes by the same people who participated in the tweet “campaign”. However, *#myNYPDfile* created a community of feeling that made more bearable the reality of the everyday injustices that the Muslim community must endure and stated anew the hope for a new self. They performed to themselves, and to everyone else who might be interested to look, the contours of this most-wanted identity that is concerned, just like other Americans, with the banality of life. By creating for themselves, through Twitter, their own space of “normality” that others refuse to grant appearance becomes a relevant form of resistance. Appearance offers what other forms of struggle, in this context, may not provide: a supportive gaze.

PRISM: The Beacon Frame: The Disempowering Reproduction of a Repressive Gaze

Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev presented *PRISM: The Beacon Frame* (Oliver and Vasiliev 2014) at the Transmediale Festival in February 2014 in Berlin. The 27th edition of Transmediale, themed Afterglow, questioned the unexpected consequences of the digital revolution, “explor[ing] our present post-digital moment as one in which former treasures of our mediated life are turning into trash” (2015). In this context, the two artists proposed *PRISM* as a reflection on the pervasiveness and secrecy of the state

surveillance conducted by the US National Security Agency (NSA) and the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) revealed a few months before by Edward Snowden.

Offering a countervisuality of the invisible state surveillance is at the heart of *PRISM*. To do so, Oliver and Vasiliev created an artwork that projects onto a screen the digital information of all the communication devices located into its range effect. Concretely, *PRISM* presents itself as a military-grade case containing a computer. The computer localizes, maps and communicates with nearby phones as they connect to the local wireless network. Once communication is established, *PRISM* “hijacks” the devices’ unique identification information (username, hostname, IP address) and projects it through a solid-glass prism onto a screen, showing to the audience the collected information and creating, in the artists’ words, “a rich and exploitative light show” (Oliver and Vasiliev 2014). In parallel, *PRISM* sends to all hijacked devices a text-message “of a troubling, humorous and/or sardonic nature”—such as “Welcome to your new NSA partner network”—that informs the owner that his mobile phone has been hacked and provides him with a link to the project’s website (Oliver and Vasiliev 2014). At first sight, the project may not seem to be a performance for it does not bring the artists into appearance. I argue, however, that it forces the appearance of others. In that sense *PRISM* is made possible by the (un)conscious performances of its spectators, although their performances may not be as emancipatory as the artists wished it to be.

PRISM is a subversive artwork. Without developing a specific argument against surveillance, it raises questions on the extent and most importantly secrecy of state surveillance. The artists want to make visible the current surveillance practices in the hope of raising a public debate that they say is too often silenced by authorities. This objective of bringing to sight what is hidden is materialized into the form of the artwork. Mimicking technologies used by the NSA and GCHQ, *PRISM* is thought as spectacles that allow the “[a]udiences peering into the prism [to] ‘see inside’ the internal workings” of state surveillance (Oliver and Vasiliev 2014). As the artists explain:

PRISM: The Beacon Frame is a speculative, functional response to the general absence of information as to what NSA PRISM equipment actually looks like. Centred with the image of the prism, the project seeks to provide public direct contact with the aesthetics, technology and strategies used by states against their publics (and others), retained from critical contact by an opaque and coveted surveillance culture (Oliver and Vasiliev 2014).

Secrecy might be part of its strength, but it also constitutes, for the artists, the vulnerability of state surveillance. Once people see what happens, it is expected that they will reject it.

The countervisuality project of *PRISM* was mostly relayed by critiques (Pangburn 2014; Brucker-Cohen 2014; Lechner 2014; Pearlman 2014; Squires 2014). For Ellen Pearlman, “[t]he display [of hacked information] allowed audiences to witness the internal workings of phone intercepts splashing all over the walls” (Pearlman 2014). It allowed audiences seeing the mechanics of the state surveillance to which they are all subjected. But for this display to be possible, *PRISM* needed the presence of others, transformed against their knowledge into performers. *PRISM* projected onto a screen for others to watch its spectators’ performances. Spectators saw their digital selves and those of the people surrounding them. The question then becomes: whose secrets were the artists revealing?

If it might be true that *PRISM* brings light onto the secrecy of state surveillance, a number of spectators felt it was done at too high a cost. Demands were made at the Transmediale Festival organizers that the artwork be disabled or official complaints would be addressed to the German Federal Police. In reaction, facing the threat of lawsuits, the Festival disabled the project. Although I do not want to make the apology of art censorship, I believe it is relevant to explore why spectators made such a radical demand in the context of a critical art festival dedicated to the setbacks of the digital revolution. In such specific context,

the audience could be expected to be both critical of technological utopias and aware of aesthetic subversive methods.

In a letter of support to *PRISM*, Olof Mathé, co-curator of the ArtHackDay where the project was first presented, raised the following questions:

In a certain light, it's ironic that a component of the installation be taken down since it merely re-articulates some of the core questions raised by the piece: Who controls our infrastructure? Why is certain technology the prerogative of those in power? How can we foster public debate around the ramifications of technological choices? (Mathé quoted in Oliver and Vasiliev 2014).

These questions are indeed central to understanding the social significance of technology. This being said, for all their importance, they leave aside the relations of power that the artwork itself reproduces. However, without looking at the performers/spectators of *PRISM*, it is difficult to understand the disempowering effect of the project. *PRISM* is visually interesting, it addresses a trendy issue, and even if it does not point towards the marginalizing effect of surveillance, it keeps with the spirit of Snowden's revelations about the indiscriminateness of the "collect it all" rationale of state surveillance.

The problem with *PRISM*'s performances becomes more apparent when one tries to identify of what or whom it is subversive. What or who does the light show exploit? It does not directly exploit the infrastructure of state surveillance, but helps visualize invisible surveillance by mimicking its aesthetic. In this regard, other projects from Oliver and Vasiliev better achieve their subversive objective (Oliver 2015; Oliver, Sjölen, and Vasiliev 2015). In fact, *PRISM* exploits the subjectivity of its spectators, highlighting their (un)conscious acceptance of state surveillance, their complicity with structures of power that today none can (or should) ignore. However, it is too simple to say that complaints were made because people refused to see the truth about their participation to state surveillance. They were made, I argue, because in order to make their statement, the artists reproduced the very structures of power they claimed to resist. In the process they reaffirmed the objectified identity of the performers/spectators whose secrecy, privacy and consent are routinely ignored, baffled for a "greater good". The artists' addition of an extra-layer of exploitation, although maybe relatively insignificant in scope, was refused by some people present at the Festival.

Although it may not strictly qualify as a *sousveillance* project since *PRISM* does not practically monitor surveillance authorities but make visible practices and technologies, it suffers similar ills. Like Cop Watch or Steve Mann's *Shooting Back* it overly targets, intentionally or not, those who already are most precarious: people subjected to the surveillant eyes (Huey, Walby, and Doyle 2006; Monahan 2010). In that sense, the forced performances that it imposed to the spectators and the victimized identity it projected onto them mark the failure of *PRISM* to create a space of self-fashioning, disempowering rather than empowering those who came in contact with the artwork. The countervisuality project of *PRISM* exploited those already exploited by state surveillance. As such it leaves no space for translation. Despite the artists' claim that they want to raise questions more than to provide answers, *PRISM* leaves no doubt on the expected effect of the artistic intervention: the refusal of state surveillance. Pleading that to "develop critical discourses about the world we live in ... [s]ometimes ... requires that we are not limited by exaggerated fears and legal definition" (Oliver and Vasiliev 2014), the artists justified their project on artistic freedom. However, this does not solve the main problem with *PRISM*: the cruel reality that the effect of surveillance is not universally distributed, but discriminatory and marginalizing. In this context, *PRISM* consists in one more example of privileged "looking back" offered to white men (Monahan 2015). To say, as does Jonah Brucker-Cohen on Rhizome, that the controversy surrounding *PRISM* is "the ultimate compliment to the artists—since perhaps the greatest form of success for a surveillance project is to have it shut down by the authorities" (Brucker-Cohen 2014) is short-sighted. Gordon Graham's

observation that controversy is no guarantee for great art is a timely reminder. For artists of the avant-garde, Graham tells us,

[a]nything truly innovative will be challenging, and if its purpose is in part to subvert established ways of thinking and doing, it will inevitably seem threatening also. As a response to criticism, however, this runs the risk of committing the logical fallacy known as ‘affirming the consequent’. From the fact (if it is one) that great art is always challenging or even threatening, we cannot draw the inference that art that is challenging or threatening is thereby great (Graham 2005: 187).

Tracking Transience: From Would-be Investigators to Translators

For the last decade, Hasan Elahi has performed his own existence in his artwork *Tracking Transience* (Elahi 2013). On the website that serves as the medium for his project, Elahi exposes his everyday life. Thousands of photographs of places he travelled to and things he bought, geographic coordinates, third-party documents such as bank records, bills and transportation tickets, and an almost-real-time Google Map that shows where he is are exposed; *Tracking Transience* works as a comprehensive monitoring of the artist’s life in all its banality. In parallel, it is an invitation to reflect on state surveillance, on the discriminatory effect of security practices and on the construction of one’s identity.

At the very first level, *Tracking Transience* is the continuation of Elahi’s encounter with the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (Elahi 2011). In June 2002, Elahi, a naturalized American citizen born in Bangladesh, was arrested and questioned by the FBI regarding a rented storage. Following erroneous hints, the FBI believed Elahi was linked to terrorist plots and so detained and questioned him. Although the six-month interrogation process that followed this first encounter with the FBI cleared his name of all suspicions, Elahi was not officially discharged since he was not officially charged with anything. The interrogations were made pre-emptively, in parallel to normal judicial procedures. Fearing that other mistakes might occur, Elahi began to inform his FBI case officer about his frequent international travels. The correspondence was, for the artist, a voluntary act of self-divulgence to guarantee his right to safe travels. As the FBI was once unable to accurately gather information on him, he decided to help the investigators to make sure no one believes again he is a threat to the American security. “You want to watch me? Fine”, explains Elahi, “But I can watch myself better than you can, and I can get a level of detail that you will never have” (Elahi 2011). From there sparks the idea of his art project: “why just tell the FBI—why not tell everyone?” (Elahi quoted in Olson 2006).

Starting as a monologue addressed to the US security surveillance assemblage, an assertion of his non-threatening identity, *Tracking Transience* becomes a dialogue with the world. It is an invitation to look at who Elahi really is. However, Elahi’s self-surveillance is not as plain as it looks. It is also a critical re-interpretation of the relation between the surveillant eyes and one’s self-exposure. Paradoxically, Elahi’s exposure is a strategy for anonymity. For the artist, “the best way to protect your privacy is to give it away” (Elahi quoted in Thompson 2007). Mimicking the security surveillance aesthetics, the artist contests the demand made upon him to always be visible and the threatening identity that was imposed upon him by the US security surveillance assemblage.

Although Elahi exhibits photographs of his whole life, he does so in a manner that remains anonymous: spaces remain mostly faceless, himself appearing nowhere, but indirectly as the photographer (Fisher 2014: 61). This situates the project at an unexpected crossroad between anonymity and hyper-personalization. On the one hand, the snapshots lack story. Anybody could have taken them just as they could represent any standardized (non-)space. On the other hand, in these pictures all of Elahi’s everyday life is revealed. This creates the hope that whoever is willing to dig below the impersonal varnish of the pictures can establish links between them, find recurrences, and at the end reconstruct Elahi’s life. However, this reconstruction is not an easy task, if at all possible. *Tracking Transience* is by design “user-

unfriendly” (Elahi 2011). The website presents slow and apparently random slideshows of photographs upon which the watcher has no control. It is impossible to direct the website towards one set of photographs or to obtain more information about one photograph. Even cross-referencing photographs and other available information such as third-party documents or geographical coordinates seems gargantuan since most photographs are not dated and could at some point be photographs of anywhere (Wolthers 2013: 172). At the end, how the photographs are reassembled in *Tracking Transience* remains undisclosed. The artist alone knows the connections made between them, leaving the watchers to contemplate about their meaning.

As the “real” Hasan Elahi is nowhere to be found, the absence of the referent leaves to the would-be investigator only traces to explore. What appears are selected glimpses into his life not so different from the glimpses of life that are collected here and there and reassembled by state surveillance. As a whole his new data double is brought to life to challenge the threatening identity that was forced on him by the FBI (Wolthers 2013: 172). But this identity is ambiguous: so apparent, so easily seen, and at the same time always unknown.

Elahi’s performance of self-fashioning is an encounter with, first, the US security surveillance assemblage during which he claims the “right to look back” (Wolthers 2013: 174). However, security authorities are not the artist’s sole audience. He also engages the world to think anew its relation with state surveillance, the discriminatory effect of its security practices and the process through which non/threatening identities are constructed. Even if he questions the legitimacy of him being inaccurately surveilled and associated with terrorism, Elahi, however, does not propose any predetermined answer to the complex relations he highlights. The contemplative nature of Elahi’s photographs could be associated with what Rancière calls pensive images. “It contains unthought thought, a thought that cannot be attributed to the intention of the person who produces it and which has an effect on the person who views it without her linking it to a determinate object” (Rancière 2009: 107). For Rancière, the indeterminacy of the pensive image invites translation. Similarly, *Tracking Transience* invites would-be investigators to become translators, to make their own Elahi’s experience and questions.

At the core of Elahi’s project is the concept of subjectivity. Against the imposition by the FBI of an objectified, racialized terrorist identity, against the transparent consistent self that is expected by state surveillance (Nakamura 2009: 152), Elahi tries to retrieve control of who he is by performing a new indeterminate self. In this self-fashioning process, the wide audience of *Tracking Transience*—the artwork has circulated abundantly since 2003 in international art exhibits, academic conventions, and mainstream and niche media—offered recognition of his identity. The circulation of *Tracking Transience* also contributed to the construction of a community of translators, of a counterpublic that is interested in discussing and revising the meaning of security surveillance. The community of translators that is formed by the circulation of *Tracking Transience* and that appears when people comment on the artwork and surveillance becomes unorganized and polymorphic political voices challenging security urges for more, and more invasive, surveillance practices.

In a world where US military academics call for the targeting of legal critiques of the war on terror (Ackerman 2015), where being visible provides the data from which the security surveillance assemblage asserts control, the significance of public appearance should not be dismissed. The Manichean security rationale that animates state surveillance and divides the world into good and bad, safe and threatening, has proved highly discriminatory, grounded on stereotypes, reproducing existing inequality and further marginalizing those already occupying the margins of society (Amoore and de Goede 2008b; de Goede 2008; Amoore and de Goede 2008a). Against the attempt “to securitize nearly all forms of mobility and otherness” (Muller 2014), Elahi’s dissensual counterpublic translates the artist’s observations and take on themselves to declare the wrongs of the security surveillance police order and to claim Elahi’s “right to look back”. In this process, they bring into being the alternative world that Elahi’s project proposes, a

world where appearance is not simply an act of submission, but a challenge to security consensus and a way to fashion the world back.

Conclusion: Spectatorship and the Unpredictability of the Artistic World Making

Being under surveillance is increasingly part of normality. While appearance often reinforces existing social structures, it can also contribute to creative self-transformation. Looking at three such performances intended to provide a space of self-fashioning, I argued for the need to expand the scope of analysis beyond the performer(s) to include spectators as a different category from state and corporate surveillance. Following Adrian Kear's definition of art and relational ontology and Jacques Rancière's emancipated spectatorship, I proposed that considering spectators alongside performers might help understand how appearance may forge new individual and collective identities. Art creates a space of encounter between a spectator and the artist and for the former a relation with the latter's world. This encounter with a different world provides an opportunity to think anew, to question the present consensus of things not simply along the lines of the artist's proposition (if any), but with one's power to think for oneself. Taken collectively, the multitude of spectators becomes a self- and world-fashioning public. In that sense, performers' attempts to claim the "right to look back" can be amplified (or denied) by emancipated spectators who translate the performances for themselves. For the three performances surveyed, spectators engaged in different relationships with the performers. In *#myNYPDfile*, *PRISM: The Beacon Frame* and *Tracking Transience*, spectators respectively provided a reinforcing gaze, denied the artists' appropriation of their performances, and created a counterpublic protesting present security surveillance practices. These three cases present succinct examples of a much broader spectrum of spectatorship. If one accepts that spectators, audiences and publics should not be pre-emptively objectified, then the contingency of spectatorship reminds us of the unpredictability of the artistic world making. This is not to say that all spectators actively engage with the performances seen, but by giving attention to an often-neglected set of eyes one can appreciate more broadly the transformative effect of artistic performances.

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