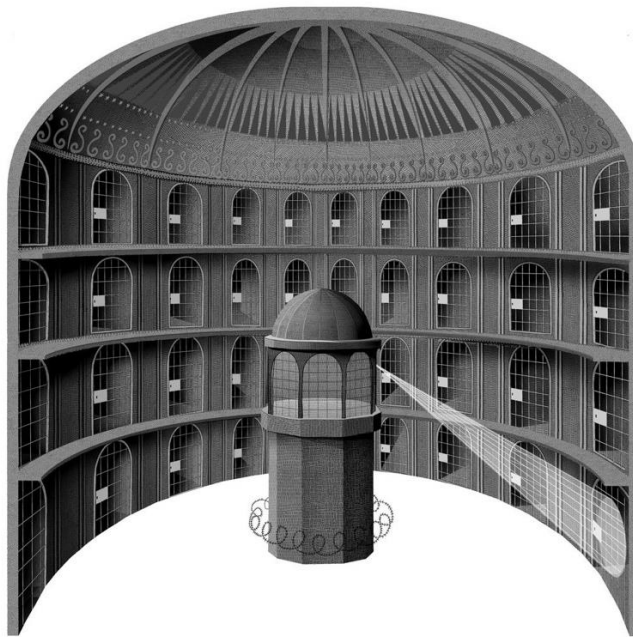


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The Surveillance State

How image-makers digitally observe the world



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Using at least 3 examples, consider how image makers have utilised digital technology to explore at least one of the following: Conflict, the Environment, Identity, the Surveillance State, the Technological Society?

Figures;

Fig. 1 | *Interior View of Cell House, new Illinois State Penitentiary at Stateville, near Joliet*

Fig. 2 | Hammerand, A (2013). *A New Town*

Fig. 3 | van Houtryve, T (2012). *Blue Sky Days*

Fig. 4 | Cirio, P (2012-17). *Street Ghosts*

Fig. 5 | DeSieno, M (2018). *No Man's Land*

Fig. 6 | Chanarin, O. Broomberg, A (2013). *Spirit is a Bone*

Considering the Surveillance State as a focus point, this essay aims to how artists have explored said topic. By dissecting selected works from lens-based image-makers, the utilisation of digital technology will be addressed, as artists adapt computerised systems to effectively communicate their message. The critical theories of key thinkers will be applied, as this essay interrogates the relevance of Bentham's panoptic discipline in the twenty-first century. This essay will also comment on the morality of surveillance photography, given the rising controversy and awareness of the Surveillance State.



Fig. 1

In 1791, English philosopher and juror, Jeremy Bentham, expressed his plans for the *Panopticon*. Bentham proposed a penitentiary with a central watchtower that could observe each cell from every angle. The design of the *Panopticon* ensures that those being surveyed are unaware of the watcher, thus manipulating their sense to conform. "The inmate must never know whether he is being looked at, at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201) - French philosopher, Michel Foucault, suggests that the *Panopticon* was effective in its purpose of control, and was destined to branch out amongst the societal body (Foucault, 1977, p. 207). Since Bentham's proposition, two panoptic prisons have been physically constructed; one residing in Illinois, another in Cuba. The concept of the "Surveillance State" describes the widespread observation of every living being, regardless of

innocence or wrongdoing. With over 1 billion surveillance systems in effect across the world (Bischoff, 2023), the public are lurked upon from every angle.

In an evolving era that is defined by its technological advances, members of the public have become trapped inside a modern Panopticon. The growing trend of governed observation begs us – the ‘observed’ – to question if our privacy is ever truly private. The notion of observation is an involuntary *and* voluntary endeavour. A modern-day case in which one subjects themselves to surveillance is the ascension of social media platforming. “Social surveillance” describes the use of ‘Web 2.0’ sites such as Facebook and Instagram, in the context of online surveillance (Marwick, 2012). With an estimation of 4.9 billion active users worldwide (Wong, 2023), social networking remains a staple in the role of cyber surveillance. Beginning with online profiles, users of social media platforms are inclined to display their personal information and identification in their biographies, including names, ages, and locations of residence. The ‘grid’ format in which posts are organised, seem to mimic CCTV-monitoring control rooms, with each tile (screen) documenting the user’s past activities. In contrast to CCTV systems, users can control others see. Consumers of social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram can privatise their accounts. Doing so, users can hand-pick who observes them daily.

Lens-based image makers have employed surveillant technologies to explore the concept of the Surveillance State. The relevance of Bentham’s panoptic discipline in the present-day is considered, as photographers address a world under scrutiny.



Fig. 2

Andrew Hammerand constructs a suburban Panopticon in his photographic series, *A New Town* (2013). By infiltrating the surveillance system of a church in the American Midwest, Hammerand observes upon the oblivious, real-time stills through the eyes of the watcher. *A New Town* depicts members of the town, pursuing their everyday lives, alongside architectural and environmental motifs. As the result of a non-optimised device, the resolution appears coarse in its quality. This inadvertently dehumanises the subjects, reducing them to figures in Hammerand's collection of embodied data. *A New Town* presents an absurd selection of imagery, juxtaposing in scenarios and subject matter.

Closed-circuit television, abbreviated to 'CCTV', is the most prominent form of surveillance today, which relies on the strategic placement of secluded cameras in public spaces. The CCTV surveillance system was first introduced in 1927 by Russian inventor, Leon Theremin, consisting of a camera and a shortwave radio (Martin, 2023). By installing these devices amongst buildings and other populated areas, security officers can monitor anti-social behaviour, such as vandalism or criminal activity. Closed-circuit televisions operate on a 24-hour basis, all year round, meaning that any activity, guilty or guilt-free, is always monitored.

Difficult to decipher a definite context, Hammerand leaves it up to the ‘watcher’ to decide on what they perceive; they are invited to conjure their own narratives. In this series, CCTV captures act as freeze-frames, depicting moments of conversation and solo expeditions. The audience may be keen to ask, “what are they talking about?” or “where are they going?”. In a vast country such as the United States of America, the concern regarding surveillance is conspicuous. Research from 2015 found that an astounding 88% of Americans feel should not be watched without their permission (Pew Research Centre, 2015).

Growing tensions amongst the development of societal observation questions the ethics of surveillance photography. Without the consciousness of his subjects, many would allude to Hammerand’s work as an invasion of privacy. Although he does not disclose the precise location of *A New Town*, an audience with no prior knowledge of open-access surveillance systems may feel inclined to investigate its capabilities, only increasing the spectacle amongst surveillance. Given the project’s presence and documentation, people of the unidentified town will remain encapsulated in this series and will continue to be observed for years to come.



Fig. 3

Through the procedure drone photography, *Blue Sky Days* (Houtryve, 2012) proposes a bird's-eye perspective of sites, prone to non-native air strikes and under organised surveillance. Documenting congregations, ranging from ceremonial occasions and funerals to prisons and the Mexico-United States border, Houtryve examines the cross-section between conflict and observation. "I no longer love blue skies" (Rehman, 2013) - referencing Zubair Rehman, whose grandmother fell victim to a drone strike, *Blue Sky Days* comments on the devastating toll of ariel conflict. By resorting to drone photography as a choice of medium, Houtryve directly contrasts the role drones play in warfare, by using them as a device for artistic expression.

Unmanned aerial vehicles, primarily used in fields of combat, provide an aerial perspective with the purpose of surveillance and assault. In the modern era, the demand for recreational drones has sky-rocketed, with only 37% of registered drones being used for commercial practises (Leslie, 2023). With a vast majority of recreational UAV systems including a built-in camera, those with access are free to observe and capture the surroundings they encounter; this is demonstrated in Houtryve's *Blue Sky Days*. Considering the volume of drones in usage across military, recreational, and commercial variants, their contribution in the discussion of the Surveillance State is emphasised; multiple airborne cameras act as an aerial Panopticon.

Under operation of the United States government, UA systems targeted northern regions of Pakistan to eradicate terrorist activity. As noted, large crowds were established as focal points for attack, which subsequently resulted in the deaths of innocent bystanders. In total, 1130 civilians were killed as the result of the drone strikes in Pakistan (Lewis, 2014). The civilian in question was a 67-year-old woman, who was okra-picking outside her home (Houvtryve, 2012). “In fact, I now prefer grey skies” (Rehman, 2013) - civilians of Pakistan find a state of serenity in the presence of cloudy skies, which outsiders would argue against; it is a signifier that drones will not be in operation.

With the rise of utility in photography and military demonstrations, the desire for unmanned aviation, in the context of surveillance, becomes increasingly evident. According to an article by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the FAA – Federal Aviation Administration – had estimated that 30,000 surveillance drones would take flight in the United States by 2020 (EFF, 2019). With such an extensive volume of aerial surveillance, every square-mile is monitored. Drone surveillance is pervasive, yet completely out of the public’s control; there is nothing we can do to avoid being inspected, other than to stay hidden.



Fig. 4

Street Ghosts (Cirio, 2012-17) uncovers the internet's non-authorised collection of public imagery, by accessing Google Maps' "Street view" system. In Paolo Cirio's intervention, digital captures of individuals are re-purposed and installed in the exact locations they were found. By doing this, Cirio speaks on the longevity of digital information in the cyberspace, by revealing it in the public eye. The low resolution of the camera presents obscure, out-of-focus representations of the subjects which act as remnants; Cirio describes them as "a digital shadow haunting the real world" (Cirio, 2012). *Street Ghosts* semi-permanently disrupts privacy in a space where it is absent.

Debuting in 2007, Google's geocoded "Street View" apparatus provides a digitised 360-degree view of the world, through satellite and aerial imagery. Through the process of stitching multiple captures together, Street View is put forward as a visual aid for the uncertain explorer. The collection of visual data is distributed by the means of transport and pedestrian efforts, accompanied with panoramic cameras. By doing so, the public are unknowing of the documentation, as the capture devices blend in with the environment.

Similarly to Hammerand's *A New Town*, Cirio interferes with the solitude of human beings through openly accessible, image-capture devices. In this case, Google Maps is re-established as a form of surveillance, which simultaneously counters its intended role of guidance. *Street Ghosts* collects 'data' from cities across the United States, Europe, and Asia. The act of re-introducing these figures into their initial space immortalises the subjects, which is implied within the projects title. The idea of the 'digital footprint' comes to realisation, when you consider how the privacy of the subject is intruded and put on display in physical and online spaces.

The three-dimensional tool that is provided by Google behaves as a contemporary panoptic. With over 1 billion users on a monthly scale (Russell, 2019), the discussion of consumer-operated surveillance is brought forward; the modern-day trend of free roaming this system at one's leisure, is a vital factor in this. As a spectator of Cirio's work, the reaction of the observee comes to mind. How did they feel? It is appropriate to assume that the confrontation would have been a surreal experience, encountering themselves in a public place. Additionally, the subject may have felt violated; the controversial ethicality of surveillance photography becomes apparent, as permission from the subjects is disregarded.



Fig. 5

In Marcus DeSieno's photo series *No Man's Land* (2018), the boundary of surveillance is investigated through the interference of CCTV cameras across the world. As opposed to *A New Town*, which takes on closed-circuit televisions within an urban space, *No Man's Land* captures landscapes of natural terrains. Highly contrasting, monochromatic photographs are produced, presenting surreal depictions of the secluded, natural world. By pointing a large-format camera directly at the surveillance output (Smyth, 2018), a contrast between analogue and digital methodologies is established, causing a variance in texture and subject visibility. *No Man's Land* implies a dystopia in the present, where isolated locations are observed upon in secrecy.

As a society, we are watched upon from every angle; *No Man's Land* reveals that surveillance operations are not only undertaken in cities and suburbia but are also concealed within the wild. Given the loose security on CCTV surveillance, which has been previously addressed in Hammerand's work, anyone with a working knowledge can gain access. DeSieno announces the Surveillance State as a worldwide concern; the utility of foreign surveillance devices reinforces this assumption. The existence of hidden CCTV in nature solidifies the omnipresence of surveillance in the twenty-first century.



Fig. 6

Oliver Chanarin and Andy Broomberg adopt Russian governmental technology in their series of portraits, *Spirit is a Bone* (2013). Describing this work as “the digital equivalent of a death mask” (Chanarin and Broomberg, 2013), *Spirit is a Bone* uses facial-recognition hardware to produce uncanny representations of Russian citizens. With lack of a torso, the subject’s likeness is at the forefront, as their facial characteristics are focal. In this work, the subjects are stripped of their names. Instead, they are referred by their occupation. Commonly situated within public sectors, the facial-recognition surveillance used in *Spirit is a Bone* takes on the role of categorisation, archiving members of communal spaces.

This body of work was motivated by August Sander’s *Menschen des 20 Jahrhunderts* (1925), which creates a taxonomy of German society (Skidmore, 2016); “Taxonomy” refers to the science of classifying organisms. In his convention, Sander studies upon the social divide in twentieth century Germany (MoMA, 2023) in a series of portrait photographs. Subjects are classified by their profession or social status in Sander’s visual catalogue. Chanarin and Broomberg have acknowledged *Menschen des 20 Jahrhunderts*, adapting Sander’s process to *Spirit is a Bone* to comment on the Russian state of governed surveillance.

The use of facial-recognition in surveillance operations is a contentious topic. With its primary role of tracking down suspected criminals, members of the public question the system’s morality. According to Big Brother Watch, a campaign that opposes the use of facial-recognition in the United Kingdom, more than 3000 people are misidentified by biometric

identification (Big Brother Watch, 2023). Additionally, there is no law in place that obligates the use of facial-recognition in police surveillance, so the legality of this surveillance method betrays the trust of the public. Over half a million facial-recognition surveillance cameras are installed across Russian cities (Avilov, 2023). Chanarin and Broomberg's archive proposes the fact that collective surveillance is undertaken regardless of social class.

To conclude, this essay has discussed how lens-based image makers adopt digital methods to explore the concerns around the Surveillance State. By re-purposing surveillance systems as tools for production, photographers have addressed privacy violation by using the devices that are responsible. In a modern world where the public are observed at all times, Bentham's Panopticon remains a relevant concept in the present.

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