

Question 1:

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
Technology Society?

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Programme of Study: Photography in the Arts

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How have contemporary image makers utilised digital technology to explore the connection between the surveillance state and identity?

In an age that is currently defined by data collection, algorithmic governance and networked communication, the relationship between art, technology, surveillance and identity has become increasingly significant. The term 'surveillance state' refers to the political and technological systems that enable continuous observation of data collection on large populations often operating through invisible schemes. This is typically justified by the intention of monitoring national security or crime prevention yet is highly criticised for the invasion of privacy and personal freedom. It is argued that the operations of the surveillance state have become negatively entangled with digital technologies of seeing, tracking and categorising individuals. As Simone Browne (2015) argues, surveillance is never neutral; it is a political and cultural technology that produces forms of visibility and invisibility. Contemporary image-makers have responded to this ongoing concern by utilising digital tools ranging from satellite systems to automated mapping platforms to expose and critique the ways in which identity is exposed by surveillance infrastructures.

This essay examines how artists Trevor Paglen, Hasan Elahi, and Mishka Henner use digital technologies to reveal the use of surveillance and its impacts on personal and collective identity. Paglen visualises the invisible systems that classify citizens as security threats, Elahi performs self-surveillance to challenge stereotypical profiling and Henner draws attention to Street View images to portray marginalised women exposed and vulnerable. Through the utilisation of digital tools, these artists transform their visions into critiques, demonstrating how image making has shifted from capturing the visible world to interrogating the invisible operations of power. As governments and corporations expand and improve their methods to monitor, categorise and predict human behaviour, contemporary image makers have increasingly turned to digital technology to expose and interrogate these hidden systems of power. Their work raises questions about the limits of surveillance, how monitoring can be justified and how far surveillance can go before it undermines privacy, identity and vulnerability.

The increase of digital surveillance systems has reshaped how identity is controlled. In a contemporary society, identity is no longer formed through self-representation or state-issued documentation. Instead, it is increasingly constructed through data collection, algorithmic analysis and visual monitoring. Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) concept of the "surveillant assemblage" is relevant here: a network of interconnected technologies that disassemble individuals into "data doubles" (p. 619). These digital identities matter more government control than the person themselves. Digital imaging systems, including satellite cameras, CCTV networks and automated platforms such as Google Street View, play a pivotal role within this assemblage. They produce what Paglen (2016) terms "infrastructures of seeing," forms of machine vision designed not for human spectators but for extraction, classification and predictive analysis. Identity within the surveillance state is shaped by the system of surveillance itself. As Browne (2015) notes, systems of surveillance disproportionately target racialised, migrant and marginalised bodies, shaping their life chances through visibility and exposure.

Artists working with digital technologies have played a pivotal role in exposing and critiquing these systems of surveillance. By manipulating the very systems used by states and corporations, they reveal how identity is not simply documented but actively produced by surveillance infrastructures. Trevor Paglen reveals the invisibility of state surveillance, Hasan Elahi challenges systems that mis-label identity and Mishka Henner reveals how automated imaging systems increase women's existing vulnerability. Together, these artists demonstrate how digital image-making exposes the systems and effects of surveillance, revealing how identity is shaped through data.

Trevor Paglen is a contemporary artist whose work primarily investigates and critiques the widespread of surveillance. His practise uses digital tools as a way of exposing systems that are deliberately hidden. He not only shows what surveillance looks like but also critiques this. By revealing and critiquing the surveillance state, he exposes systems that are deliberately hidden from public view and knowledge. Paglen uses advanced technologies to make these systems visually present. By showing what governments and organisations try to hide, Paglen reveals the scale of the security and secrecy surrounding the surveillance state and questions and exposes as to why that is. Through

is work, Paglen reveals that the surveillance state operates not just through secret facilities but through every day cooperations and systems that shape how societies are governed through surveillance. Across his practise Paglen uses digital technologies, not to emphasise and highlight these processes but to reveal the hidden political structures embedded in the surveillance state. His work offers forms of seeing that challenge the secrecy and power that define the modern surveillance state. Paglen claims “there is often nowhere on Earth where a civilian might be able to see them with an unaided eye”. Paglen’s photographic series *Limit Telephotography* (2007), used advanced long-distance lenses to capture secret military sites such as NSA listening stations and CIA black sites. The images in this project are grainy, atmospheric and distant which reflect the difficulty of seeing infrastructures that are designed to remain invisible. Paglen’s technique relies on the same technological tools as the surveillance state such as longer lenses, more powerful sensors and enhanced digital processing. The significance of this is not just the subject matter but within the act of stretching the limits of optical technology to reveal what is intentionally obscured.



Figure 1



Figure 2

The technique involves using telescopes which have focal lengths range between 1300mm and 7000mm. At this level of magnification, hidden aspects of the landscape become apparent. This series of work challenges the boundaries of visibility and perception. The images in this project does not just expose purposely hidden locations of surveillance but explores the limitation of human percecption through different methods of technology. In a world unknowingly controlled by surveillance and digital technology. Paglen combines both aspects to create something telling.

While Paglen reveals the hidden infrastructures of surveillance, Hasan Elahi confronts surveillance at personal and embodied level. After being misidentified as a terrorist and interrogated by the U.S government following the 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers, Elahi began a project of extreme self-surveillance, documenting his daily movements, locations, meals and travel itineraries. This ongoing project, *Tracking Transience* (2003–present), represents the absurdity, invasiveness and racial profiling inherent in systems of state surveillance. Elahi’s strategy is unconventional, if the state wishes to monitor him, he will provide them with so much data he turns surveillance against itself by

oversupplying data. His website uploads continuous amounts of images. For example, hotel rooms, airport terminals, urinals, plates of food along with GPS coordinates and timestamps. The images are overwhelming in volume producing what Lyon (2007) calls “surveillance overload.” Through this, Elahi both cooperates and disrupts surveillance, exposing identity as a product of data accumulation rather than a personal human choice. Importantly, Elahi’s self-surveillance also critiques the racialised logic of the post 9/11 surveillance state. As a Bangladeshi-American Muslim man, Elahi became a target not because of his actions but because of his perceived identity. Browne’s (2015) framework of “racialising surveillance” is particularly relevant here. Surveillance systems unjustifiably target racialised populations, positioning them as threats within systems of control. Through excessive data uploading, Elahi reveals the unreasonable ideology of state suspicion and reshapes the narrative of his own identity.



Figure 3

The images are not composed aesthetically. Instead, they are produced in the style of being in low-quality, automated and repetitive. This recalls Hito Steyerl’s (2009) notion of the “poor image”, a degraded digital file circulating in vast quantities. For Elahi, the poor image becomes a tool of resistance. By flooding the system with mundane visuals,

he highlights how surveillance reduces identity to an endless stream of quantifiable fragments. What distinguishes Elahi's practice is its inversion of the surveillance gaze. Whereas surveillance typically extracts data in secrecy, Elahi voluntarily outputs his data publicly in excessive volumes, making the state's tracking meaningless. He transforms the act of watching into a performance, exposing the futility of surveillance logic. Identity becomes something negotiated through visibility and data production, rather than something imposed from above. At the same time, *Tracking Transience* is not simply celebratory of transparency. The scale of Elahi's self-documentation raises questions about privacy, visibility and agency. Is it possible to reclaim identity within systems that demand constant visibility? Or does self-surveillance inadvertently reinforce the very logics it critiques? These tensions make Elahi's work a powerful exploration of how individuals navigate the pressures of state surveillance and how digital technologies can be repurposed to resist their reductive construction of identity.

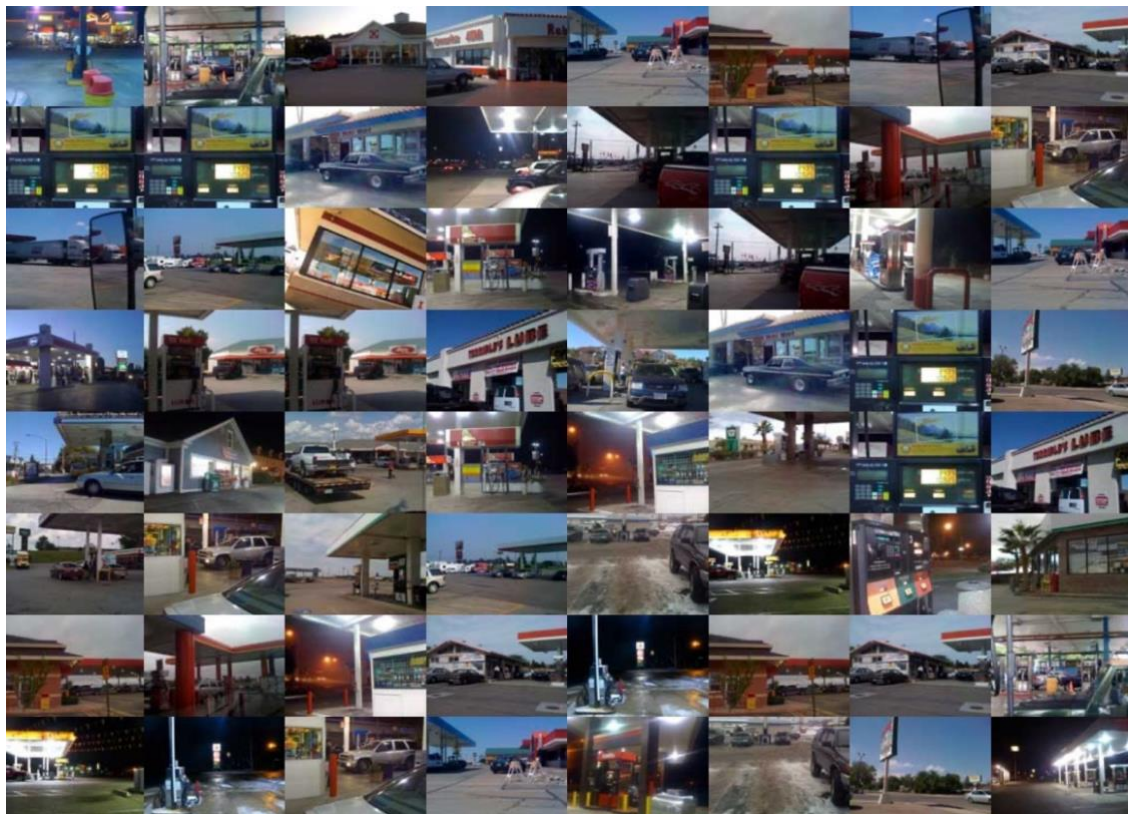


Figure 4

Mishka Henner's *No Man's Land* (2010–12) offers a disturbing and powerful example of how digital imaging technologies especially satellite mapping platforms such as Google Street View, can be used to expose the hidden operations of surveillance and the exploitation of female identity. In this body of work, Henner tracks locations known for roadside prostitution across Italy and Spain, not by photographing the women himself, but by appropriating existing Street View imagery. The resulting photographs depict isolated women standing beside highways, roundabouts, or service roads waiting, exposed, and unknowingly captured by an automated camera system that was never designed to acknowledge their presence. Although the project *No Man's Land* appears the classic style of documentary photography but the project being digitally produced challenges the traditions of documentary photography. The images were never composed with an artistic or ethical relationship between subject and photographer, instead they were made by Google's automated mapping car, whose panoramic cameras capture the roadside indiscriminately. Henner reclaims these images, enlarging and reframing them as large prints. This highlights how everyday surveillance records spreads the identities of vulnerable women without any regard for their lives.



Figure 5

The women in the images are both vulnerable at first in their real environments, often isolated and exposed to exploitation and second through their involuntary incorporation into a global visual database. As Henner writes, the work exposes “a landscape of disenfranchisement made visible by an unfeeling automated camera” (Henner, 2012). Their identity becomes a data-point record without consent, echoing Haggerty and Ericson’s concept of the “data double,” a fragmented digital version of the self produced through surveillance infrastructures (2000). The women are not individuals as far as the camera is concerned, they are elements in a map, flattened into anonymous visual information. Henner’s appropriation of these images reactivates their visibility, prompting viewers to confront the ethical implications of automated seeing.



Figure 6

The work resonates strongly with feminist critiques of surveillance, which argue that monitoring systems often reinforce the vulnerability of women, especially those in precarious or marginalised labour conditions. In *No Man's Land*, female identity is portrayed as something exposed into to a system that neither recognises nor protects it. The images juxtapose the hyper-visibility of the women captured, archived, and viewed globally with their political invisibility, as sex workers who fall outside social protections and legal recognition in many jurisdictions. Unlike Paglen's focus on the invisibility of machine vision, Henner's work highlights the asymmetry of surveillance power, those who are already socially vulnerable are most easily captured by digital mapping tools. The scale and neutrality of Street View reinforces this vulnerability. What appears to be an objective, technical image is in fact deeply ideological, shaping who is seen, how they are represented, and how their identity circulates without their knowledge. By reframing these images contextually within an art gallery space, Henner draws attention not only to the ethics of digital surveillance but also to the history of documentary photography's tendency to aestheticise the marginalised. Yet crucially, Henner himself never photographs these women. Instead, he critiques both surveillance infrastructures and the documentary tradition by revealing how the camera participates in systems of extraction, control, and exposure. In this sense, *No Man's Land* acts as a critique of both technological surveillance and the visual politics of female identity, exposing the systems that represent women visible only at their most vulnerable.

Although Trevor Paglen, Hasan Elahi, and Mishka Henner all work with digital technologies, their approaches differ in the sense of how the surveillance state forms and connects with identity. Paglen focuses on the infrastructures like satellites, data centres, machine-learning systems. His images reveal surveillance as an invisible force that operates through classification, prediction, and algorithmic interpretation. In this sense, Paglen critiques how identity is abstracted into data categories, often without public awareness, that may have consequences for individuals. Elahi in contrast, addresses the lived experience of being misidentified by the state. His self-surveillance disrupts the very idea that identity can be truthfully represented by data collection. Whereas Paglen exposes systems from the outside, Elahi reveals what it feels like to be

trapped inside those systems, his work embodying the racialised targeting that surveillance can often rely on. His identity is shaped and controlled by himself, performed through deliberate overexposure. Henner introduces a third alternative perspective, the gendered and classed vulnerabilities embedded in automated imaging systems. Unlike Paglen's invisible infrastructures or Elahi's self-constructed data double, Henner's subjects are captured involuntarily, their identities exposed without agency. His work highlights how surveillance has an impact on women in vulnerable circumstances through non ethical machine-made visibility. Together, these artists show that identity within the surveillance state is constructed through multiple mechanisms. Such as algorithmic categorisation (Paglen), racialised suspicion (Elahi), and gendered exposure (Henner). Their approaches complement one another, revealing the extent of digital surveillance's impact on contemporary identity formation.

To conclude, contemporary image-makers have critiqued the increase of surveillance by developing strategies utilising digital technologies that expose how identity is exploited within these systems. Paglen exposes hidden surveillance systems whereby they classify and interpret individuals, challenging the neutrality of machine vision. Elahi confronts the personal and racialised consequences of misidentification, using self-surveillance to reclaim control over the narrative of his identity. Meanwhile, Henner exposes the gendered vulnerabilities produced by automated imaging systems, revealing how surveillance technologies make vulnerable women visible but not protected.

Across these varying practices, digital technologies become tools of critique rather than ways of control. By visualising the systems that monitor society, these artists illuminate the profound political stakes of digital identity. Their projects portray that surveillance does not simply observe identity, it actively constructs it through classification and exposure. In making these surveillance processes visible, the artists challenge viewers to consider the power dynamics embedded in everyday technologies of seeing. Ultimately, they demonstrate that image-making is essential for understanding and resisting the surveillance state's influence on contemporary identity.

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