

Research in Context (ADAD5003)

Essay Question: *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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Word Count: 2256 + referencing

“Every man, woman, child, boy, girl. It doesn’t matter who you are, how innocent or not innocent you are, they are watching everything you’re doing.”

(Snowden, 2016) American intelligence whistleblower, Edward Snowden’s quote comes as both a profound warning and frightening statement, highlighting the growing imbalance between the rights of individuals and the current reach of the ‘Surveillance State’. Photography and digital technology, once tools for documentation, science and creativity, have been reappropriated to track and control the public. From the historical beginnings of photographic profiling to modern-genetic determinism, surveillance technologies impact many aspects of our lives. This essay will look to examine the history, ethical issues, and art-based resistance to surveillance, by discussing the contradiction of security in our current time.

To provide historical basis for this essay, I will first introduce ‘The Bertillon System’. In 1822 Paris, criminologist and former records clerk, Alphonse Bertillon developed an identification system that combined photographs and body measurements to pursue and identify criminals. This included specific measurements of the face and skull, formations of the body, height, scars and personality descriptions. This information was then collated and recorded into cards which featured a photo of the individual, otherwise known as a “mug-shot”. After great success using this method, in 1824 The Bertillon System was adopted by police forces within the UK, Europe and the USA.

Height	5'7 1/2	Head lgth	18.5	L Foot	27.7	Class	1	Age	29
Eng Hgt	5'7 1/2	Head wth	14.5	L Mid F	11.4	Areola	2.6	Apparant age	30
Out A	1 m	Cheek wth	13.5	L Lit F	9.0	Periph	4.4	Nativity	87
Trunk	41.9	R Ear lgth	6.7	L Cubit	14.1	Pecul		Occupation	farm

Remarks relative to Measurements.....



Inc	me	Bridge	2	Sup Bor	7.4	Hair	chr	Beard	chr
Height	mg	Base	2.0	Pos Bor	4.4	Complexion	dark		
Width	mg	Root	deep	Lobe	9.2	Teeth	good	Weight	140
Weight	140	Projection	in	Chin	prom	Build	2m		
Pecul	1-1-1-0-5								

Examined By: J.M. Ripe

Height	1 m 61.6	Head length	19.8	L Foot	25.5	Circle	2 1/2 m	Age	30 years
Eng Hgt	5-3 3/4	" width	15.8	L Mid F	11.7	Periph	2 1/2 m		
Chest A	1 m 61.0	Chest		L Lit F	8.9			Born in	Memphis Tenn
Trunk	85.7	Length	6.4	L Fore A	44.0				
Fore		width	3.3						

REMARKS RELATIVE TO MEASUREMENTS.....



Incl	deep	Bridge	2 1/2	Sup Bor	7.4	Hair	chr	Beard	chr
Height	mg	Base	2.0	Pos Bor	4.4	Complexion	dark		
Width	mg	Root	deep	Lobe	9.2	Teeth	good	Weight	138#
Weight	138	Projection	in	Chin	prom	Build	2m		
Pecul	1-1-1-0-5								

MEASURED AT CLEVELAND, O. { Date: August 18, 1900 By: Sherbessle

Figure 1 & 2

However, this system proved difficult and expensive to implement, due to its labor-intensive nature, tools, training, and precise execution. Even skilled technicians would record inconsistent measurements, which could also change overtime as individuals aged. Gradually, police departments abandoned Bertillon's system for the increasingly reliable fingerprinting method, but kept certain elements like mugshots and recording of basic features.

Despite the transition, these elements reflect the endurance of reducing individuals to their visual and physical information. In relation to Susan Sontag's writing *On Photography* (1977), "*To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have.*" (Sontag, 1977). These mug shots remain as a form of external judgment, criminals were not seen as people - it merely

reduces them to sets of numbers, categories and records. This reduction intentionally dehumanises them, relating to the very violation Sontag describes. The impact of Bertillon's System is still visible in our current 'Surveillance State'. Platforms such as the National Crime Agency's "Most Wanted" hub use open-access databases of wanted criminals, allowing both law enforcement and the public to track individuals by crime and location.

Technological and digital advancement has led to surveillance becoming a more omnipresent, almost Orwellian force, through the use of rampant CCTV, hidden cameras, drones and AI facial recognition software to monitor both public and private spaces. It has integrated itself into our daily lives and mundane tasks, such as self-service checkouts implementing cameras to track purchases made by individuals, creating a heightened sense of being watched. Even the structure of a camera lens physically mimics the shape and function of the human eye, creating further public pressure to conform and behave. This excerpt from Orwell's dystopian novel "1984" captures this feeling perfectly, despite its 1949 origins. *"Always eyes watching you and the voice enveloping you. Asleep or awake, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or bed—no escape. Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres in your skull."* (Orwell, 1949). Self censorship is a key theme examined throughout Orwell's novel. By living in a constant state of paranoia, the main character, Winston is driven to borderline insanity. This book still serves as a warning on the impact of overbearing, finely tuned surveillance on the human mind.

Through his series '*Tracking Transience*' (also dubbed *The Orwell Project*), artist Hasan Elahi explored the consequences of living under constant surveillance.

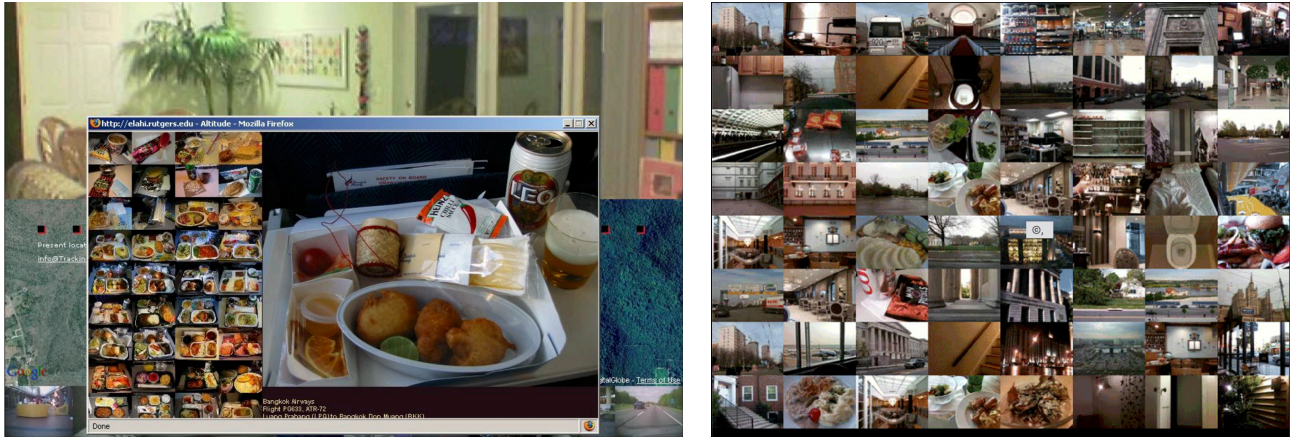


Figure 3 & 4

Hasan Elahi, a Bangladeshi-born American art professor, underwent intensive FBI interrogation after being wrongfully tipped to be part of a terrorist organisation in 2002. This project was initially created for his FBI agent, however after being cleared, Elahi was forced to regularly keep in contact with his agent and update him on his whereabouts. He eventually made this data project available to view online. The project includes hundreds of images, videos and maps used to monitor Elahi's location, communications, travel logs and even bank transactions. The website is a mosaic of Elahi's meals and public bathrooms showing the absurdity and intrusiveness of the situation, which despite his defiance, became almost robotic second nature. "*Tracking myself has become as commonplace as checking my e-mail, voice mail or my Facebook page It is something that I have internalised to the point where I don't even know I'm doing it.*" (Elahi,

2011). His statement reveals the psychological toll of being constantly surveilled, illustrating how the pressure of being monitored can become an ingrained habit, as though you become part of the machine. Elahi has more recently reflected on this project, noting how societal attitudes toward self-surveillance have evolved in the years since it began. *“Nearly 20 years ago, people were looking at me like, ‘Why in the world would you want to share all this information?’ And now, people look at me like, ‘I don’t get it. What’s the big deal? This looks like my Instagram feed.’”* (Elahi, 2021) highlights how social media and digital platforms have normalised oversharing information and self-documentation, confusing the difference between voluntary and imposed surveillance.

Elahi’s work is such a complicated personal project that provides further commentary on how systems of power demand compliance through fear and control. By sharing his life so openly, Elahi challenges the definition of surveillance itself, by turning the tables. *‘Tracking Transience’* is an example of how art can subvert systems of power by forcing viewers to confront the very real effects of living under perpetual observation.

Elahi’s work also draws comparison the concept of ‘Sousveillance’. This comes from the French word “sous “and “veillance”, roughly translating to “under watching”. This term was coined in 2003 by Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman. The word more modernly refers monitoring/

image taking that is created by some-one of the public that does not have authority or power, it respects autonomy and is created for the purpose of being an artefact or in some cases, evidence. Ultimately it aims to be the antithesis of current, state surveillance. As surveillance typically takes a 'top-down' form of public observation, 'sousveillance' would be considered a 'bottom-up' approach. More 'personal' forms of technology have evolved at a rapid pace; smartphones, body cameras, and social media, have enabled the development of widespread sousveillance, providing ordinary people tools to hold those in power accountable.

This has become more prevalent in recent years, especially when protecting the rights of 'the self', and community attempts to document abuses of power or to advocate for political transparency. Photographic activism has and continues to play a pivotal role in this development, shown recently at an incident at Manchester Airport, UK. On July 23, 2024, a video showing an armed police officer at Manchester Airport stomping on the head and face of a young Muslim man, during an arrest. The footage created public outcry and accusations of excessive force, which ultimately led to significant public protests in Rochdale and Manchester, fronted by the victims family. These protests highlighted the community's response to visible police misconduct and the global call for systemic reforms within law enforcement.

As a result, the police officer involved was later suspended, and the Independent Office for Police Conduct launched an investigation into the matter.

This incident can be analysed through Edward Snowden's related quote "*Privacy is for the powerless*" (Snowden, 2016). Snowden's statement critiques the imbalance of power in surveillance systems, where those in control demand truth from the people while preserving their own actions from investigation. The victim, in a position of powerlessness, had his dignity and safety violated in a public and violent manner, 'Sousveillance' helped protect the victim's rights and hold those involved to account. Through photographic activism and whistleblowing, sousveillance has become a powerful tool for challenging the systemic injustices we face under The Surveillance State.

An artist that has taken on a similar role of activism, in a way of creative resistance is Adam Harvey.

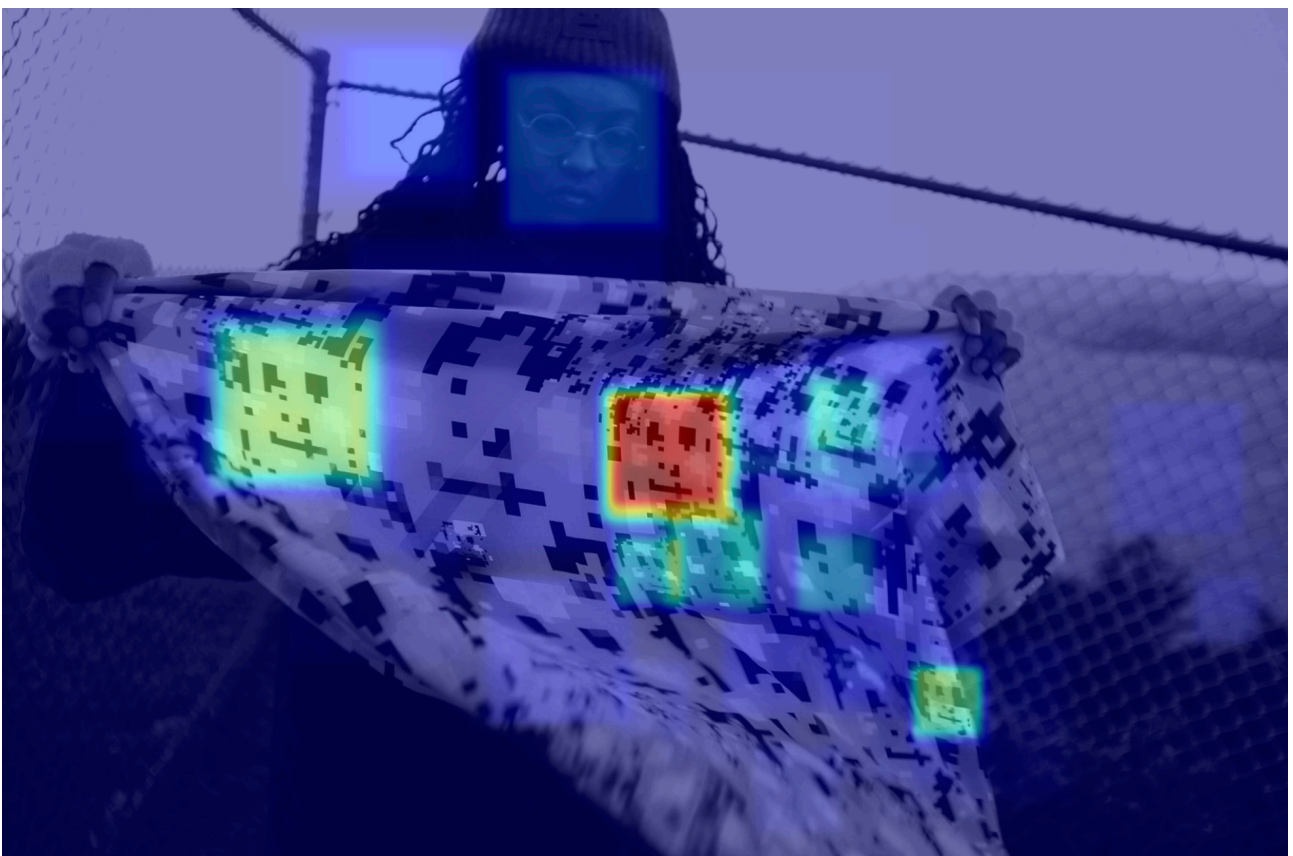


Figure 5

Harvey is a digital artist and software engineer from Berlin, that utilises his knowledge of AI and machine learning systems to create tools for personal privacy. His invention of “Hyperface” Camouflage (2017) was a project where patterns that mimic eyes, mouths and faces were printed on to fabrics in order to confuse AI facial recognition software, in favour of anonymity and privacy. His designs exploited the weaknesses in algorithmic recognition software and encouraged people to consider personal privacy in the face of pervasive, somewhat relentless surveillance. “*Hyperface*” was never publicly sold and was made for only one specific algorithm, Harvey has since stated that the camouflage was only temporarily valuable due to quickly advancing technologies and algorithms.

The anti - surveillance nature of “*HyperFace*” continues to empower individuals to resist being reduced to data, challenging the idea that the state or corporations should have unrestricted access to personal identifying factors, like facial features. This makes further connections to the historical research and findings of previously mentioned, Alphonse Bertillon.

“*HyperFace*” critiques the need for control that resulted from Bertillon’s identification system, which reduced anonymity and aided law enforcement by linking physical characteristics to identity. Where Bertillon categorised and identified, Harvey wants to obscure and anonymise by helping people to fight back against invasive, rapidly developing technologies.

Ethical concerns and social implications surrounding the Surveillance State continue to grow everyday. We are living in an age of escalating uncertainty, especially in relation to our online presence and our data unknowingly being sold, to companies all around the world. Our rights and privacy are being infringed upon in the name of corporate greed and by those who seek to stereotype, control and extort us in increasingly sinister ways. Deepfakes and AI audio/ video content have opened up even more possibility of being manipulated, on a more global scale they have the ability to influence elections or spread propaganda, decreasing public trust in our governments. AI can also reinforce harmful stereotypes in our increasingly polarised, political climate, those with a personal agenda are becoming more confident in targeting marginalised groups through fake narratives based on their own warped prejudices. Though AI generators are mainly used to aid in creativity and production, the lack of serious government intervention is creating more and more unsettling problems.

Multidisciplinary artist and self described bio-hacker, Heather Dewey-Hagborg, explores the new age ethical complications we face under our surveillance state.



Figure 6

Within her bio-political series "Stranger Visions" , Dewey- Hagborg collected discarded items from around New York City, including gum, hair and cigarette butts, from which she extracted DNA. Dewey-Hagborg digitally analysed the found DNA and then computer generated 3D, hyper- realistic face models of what the individuals might have looked like. These face models are usually displayed alongside a box containing a location image of where the item was found, the sample and written DNA analysis. Dewey- Hagborg acknowledges the limitations in accuracy of forensic DNA phenotyping. This is due to human factors such as facial structure and expressions, hairstyle, weight or personality not being discovered from genetic data alone. Forensic DNA phenotyping in this case, is brought up in ethical debate as there is potential for a culture of 'biological surveillance',

and the strange drive towards genetic determinism. Dewey-Hagborg has written an article in which she brings up her concerns of accuracy and room for a 'new wave' of racial profiling. She warns that DNA phenotyping could institutionalise genetic profiling, framing certain traits as "suspicious" based on harmful stereotypes and internalised biases. For example, it could be wrongfully used to suggest a person's potential for committing a crime or to generalise about ethnic or racial groups, similar to that of harmful pseudoscientific practices like eugenics.

The project also draws attention to issues regarding consent and state access to genetic analysis. Dewey- Hagborg demonstrates how easily DNA can be taken from discarded objects in public spaces, raising more concerns about involuntary surveillance. If these kinds of technologies become more and more common, anyone's DNA could be collected, analysed or potentially misused, more importantly without their consent. This could create an almost "biological panopticon" situation, where the public are at risk of being under hinted government surveillance via their genes.

Through her experience in both artistic and scientific fields, Dewey Hagborg's "Stranger Visions" offers reliable and relevant arguments surrounding the ethics of surveillance in terms of identity, privacy, and government accountability.

The Surveillance State raises complicated concerns surrounding, personal and public privacy, autonomy, and power, as technologies evolve from early

photographic profiling to AI and genetic analysis. While these technologies can enhance safety and creative production, their misuse risks further inequality and the dehumanisation of individuals by reducing them to data. In the context of this essay, artist resistance is crucial. The artists discussed, creatively challenge the worrying, normalisation of surveillance and expose its ethical issues. By critiquing these systems, these artists empower people, encourage discussions, and create social awareness on the need for accountability, revealing the urgent need to balance technological innovation with respect for privacy and equity. Ultimately, their efforts remind us that a more ethical and equitable future is possible, but only if we remain active in challenging the systems that threaten our fundamental rights.

FIGURES/ IMAGES USED THROUGHOUT

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3. **Website Screen shot from Hasan Elahi's Tracking Transience** - *EXHIBIT 2: Tracking Transience: The Orwell Project by Hasan Elahi*. (2008, April 9). *All Our Lives up for Grabs*. <https://allourlives.wordpress.com/trackingtransiencenet-by-hasan-elahi/>
4. **Website Screen shot from Hasan Elahi's Tracking Transience** - *Hasan Elahi: Tracking Transience – ACM SIGGRAPH ART SHOW ARCHIVES*. (n.d.-b). <https://digitalartarchive.siggraph.org/artwork/hasan-elahi-tracking-transience/>
5. **Image of Adam Harvey's "Hyperface" project** - *HyperFace*. (2017b, March 1). *Adam Harvey Studio*. <https://adam.harvey.studio/hyperface/>
6. **Image of Heather Dewey-Hagborg's "Stranger Visions"** - *Views*. (n.d.). <http://www.chronusartcenter.org/en/unreal-opening/>

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