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Intro

The dynamic the larger public has with the concept of being monitored has long been complex and it's only further evolved in a day of modernised technology. Within this essay I will be exploring how themes related to this have manifested in photography, an art practice which can either allow the artist to choose to become another faceless watcher behind a screen or give them the means to turn the attention back onto the methods of surveillance ever-present in our lives. To investigate this, I will be using three key words/phrases as points of discussion. The first will be "Privacy", something that is so frequently compromised by larger surveillance systems with the promise that it's in the pursuit of safety yet largely at no cost to the observer's own information. The next is "Security", what the systems that relentlessly overlook a space or aspect of our life claim to be in place to maintain. The final key phrase is "Passive and Organised Surveillance", where I will explore how these habits manifest and how, despite their nuanced differences, they both originate from the intention to monitor.

Privacy

Our privacy is something that we largely expect to have and to be respected. Commonly this is by us having what acts as a safe haven, a place where we are free to act however we like. A home is what is most people's immediate association, where no cameras are installed and no one without your approval can share the space you have made for yourself. There becomes a distinct divide between what you may do out on the street compared to how you act in a building. However, with changing technology and the ever-expanding presence of the internet, what becomes perceivable to unwanted

watchers inevitably increases. It's not strictly in the terms of a webcam, where to compromise a computer's settings from an external location would be a crime, rather it is the increasing amount of access we are compromising to use services, such as data recordings on websites we visit. As a result, the lines between what can truly be considered as public or private have become blurred and a widely accepted compromise to be able to keep up with the evolution of online presences. It begs the question of why our data online data (what we do, where we go, how long we're on a site, etc) doesn't raise the type of concern that more typical methods of surveillance would.



Figure 1: Stanza, 2010

Above is the work *God is Watching Over Us Outside In the Panoptican* by Steve Tanza, or “Stanza” as he refers to himself across his work. In this piece he took the CCTV camera feeds that were located within the building and then projected them onto the

side of it, free to see for the public around the area and on the street. It breaks the facade of privacy being indoors can provide us, making the happenings of a space transparent without the awareness of the subjects depicted in the work and expanding the architecture in turn by having its insides visible on the outside. Stanza's approach with this art is an engaging way to elevate the questions of transparency and technology of a modern age to an audience that may otherwise never have considered it. While assumedly private activity is covertly accessible to online providers, this installation evokes thoughts about the exact same topics of what is or isn't public domain in contemporary society and displays it in a visual form. Hille Koskela's discussions that "To be able to see offers the basic condition for collecting knowledge, for being 'in control'" (Koskela, p.297, 2002) rings true in the work, those of the public viewing the people's movements inside the building being naturally elevated to a position of higher control than those inside that are unknowing of being watched. It prevents there from ever being a "mutual gaze", that even if the individuals on the inside looked up to the CCTV broadcasting them to the public outside there would be no eye contact from the perspective of those being watched. Without that, the act of occupying that space becomes an invasion to the subject's privacy, transforming the street that the projections were displayed onto into a place of more power than being inside the building. It's less so that they have any control over the people separated from them via a wall, more so that the people inside and depicted in the projected video feeds have a disadvantage in awareness in comparison. It echoes the comparison to the "...inmate of the panoptic prison, the public in urban space is often unaware of who is responsible for surveillance." (Koskela, p.302) making the position of one sided watching one of privilege and invasion of the "watched" person's privacy to some degree.

Security

It is frequently reasoned that the sacrifices to our privacy, both by covert and overt means, is for a payoff of some variety. A trade-off must occur between the matters of our privacy in return for some security (Michael Friedewald *et al.*, p.15, 2002), despite the fact that the population would prefer to strike a balance between the two. When a company wants to harvest our online data, it is sold as being able to accommodate our preferences or a trade to see information that a company can deny us access to if we're not willing to share a bare minimum. In the sense of traditional surveillance of a space, it is to ensure our protection from deviant behaviour, privacy lost in return for our security and to hold those who may engage in criminal activity accountable. Friedewald *et al.* also discuss how the standards for what different observers consider as a threat to the public are unclear in amongst the watchers themselves:

Diverging demands and expectations in terms of the use of public space are on the one hand closely linked to subjective insecurities, and on the other hand also to the characteristics of space itself (which in turn arguably links back to the subjective dimension). (Friedewald *et al.* p145, 2017)

It creates an unclear line as to where a reasonable level of surveillance starts and the invasion of the general public's privacy "for their own safety" begins. The image below is from Esther Hovers and her project *False Positives*, where she gathered images from surveillance systems using an algorithm that some security companies are beginning to

adopt as their solution to remove the individual biases and subjective insecurities of what a human watching would consider as deviant behaviour needing to be flagged.



Figure 2: Esther Hovers, 2015-16

However, as the name of the project suggests, these images don't consist of violations of security at all. In building a code based around anomalies in "normative behaviour", it leads to a generalisation of human activity that then has no method of using context in the way a human eye would and leads to clips from CCTV being singled out for concerning activity that never existed in the first place. It can be argued that "In urban space 'absolute visibility is legitimated with the claim and the guarantee of absolute security'" (Koskela, p.297, 2002), but when the inconsistencies in a code that certain surveillance systems operate on is unreliable in being able to isolate criminal activity from daily behaviours of the public, it forces us to need to reconsider if the overstepping of privacy boundaries is really providing as much security as they will have us believe. Hovers' project highlights this, as well as to make a viewer wonder how we would

personally classify what the standard should be on what is “normal” and what is “deviant”. How should they themselves then go about their life determining if someone’s behaviour needs to be reported?

Social and Organised Surveillance

Surveillance, as defined by the Cambridge dictionary is “the careful watching of a person or place, especially by the police or army, because of a crime that has happened or is expected”. As has been stated previously, CCTV is the most widely associated form of mass observation that exists in the modern infrastructures of our public spaces. Though, this leaves the act of our own perceptions of the people around us out of the relationship between ourselves and the public areas we occupy. Whether walking down the street, sitting on a bench, or looking at the streets from our windows, these are all acts that we do as our own means to stay informed and ahead of others who may be doing the same to us in that moment. When the theories behind the supposed need for so much CCTV or access to our data suggest the idea of information being the tool for power, it’s no surprise that we still habitually engage in passive surveillance, “...the mutual and lateral eavesdropping and gossip that constitutes information gathering by individuals about their peers, a practice also described as peer-to-peer monitoring” (Zappe and Gross, p.155, 2020). It acts, in some ways, as our own method to exert control in our surroundings, despite the fact that in most places you would be in the frame of a camera’s own surveillance.



Figure 3: Peter Funch, 2007-16

42nd and Vanderbilt was a long-term project by the photographer Peter Funch; he would stand on the corner of 42nd Street and Vanderbilt Avenue in New York City and take numerous pictures of the people in the city on their morning commutes between 8:30am and 9:30am. Over the course of the work, he began to notice the same people reappearing months apart and often with the same clothes as a previous time, or smoking, or making a movement they'd been captured doing before in the same area. The social surveillance is evident in the practice, seeking habits and expected behaviours from amongst commuters the longer they were watched and documented over the years. Our intentions of passively observing the people that pass by is to try to achieve exactly this, finding a pattern or habit of behaviour that they may then break and do something we classify as abnormal. The best way to be able to achieve this is, much like the commitment Funch had to the art, is by repeatedly watching strangers to glean a degree of information for what they do and how they act (as to establish a "normative behaviour" for them). As a society we know for a fact that people will be watching us when we step outside of what we have assigned as our private area, and we watch them back in turn, which creates the effect of self-managing our behaviours to

not attract attention. It allows a flimsy sense of safety at not seeing someone directly watch us, while granting us an opportunity to be the unnoticed watcher for once.

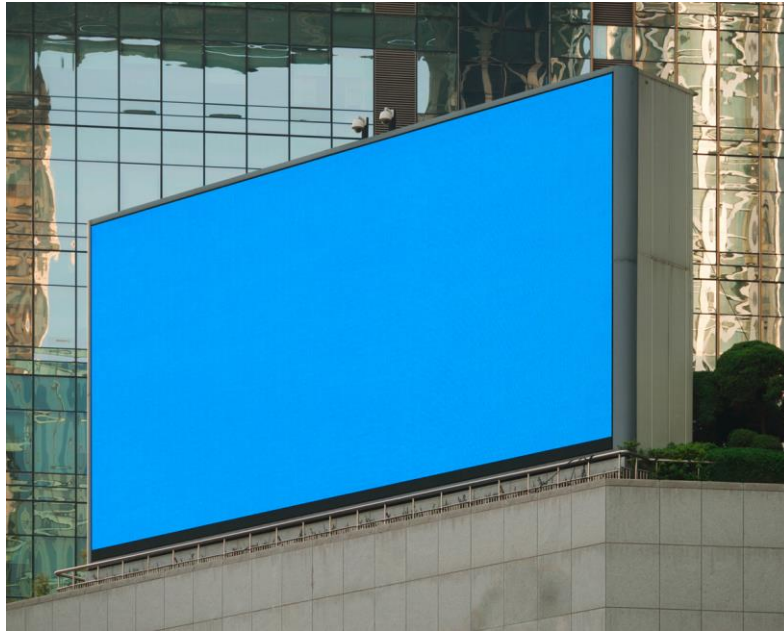


Figure 4: Michael Gessner, 2021

Despite how ingrained the power dynamics on a person to person or a public to government level of observation is, it is still entirely plausible that humans are free to defy surveillance (Zappe and Gross, p.28, 2020) if we so wished to. Michael Gessner's work for his photobook *Masse* is his own method of doing so, using the camera he possesses to shine a spotlight back onto the surveillance cameras or satellites built into everyday structures. The image above depicts a sly tactic that is done with the intention of gaining more information on the public, once again without the person's explicit knowledge that that's the intention. Governments will think strategically on the positions that they deploy and set up their "eyes", these CCTV cameras located above an advertisement board that would ordinarily have something displayed on it that grabs passerby's attention would therefore result in getting them to look up towards the

camera. It means that they gain another amount of information that we don't, a clearer face to a person walking by, claiming transparency while manipulating a circumstance for their personal gain. This is where organised surveillance largely differs from social surveillance, us observing our peers is from the perspective of a level playing field. We could see each other, and we all know we're noticing what the people around us are doing. Organised surveillance in this instance is instead where a business/government/authority is observing us from afar, across multiple angles simultaneously, and we're unable to watch back.

Conclusion

Taking my investigations of these key words/terms into account, I find it safe to settle that the presence of surveillance has an inherent effect on how we move around a space and interact with the people around us. The nature of technology's evolution and implementation has resulted in the development of us being left to believe that privacy and security aren't a balance we have the privilege or power to strike. Instead, it is perceived as a sacrifice we need to be willing to make for in exchange for uncertain pay off. It's important to keep in mind that as the boundaries of what we are told the required sacrifices of privacy are for a sense of security, that the role of "watched" and "watcher" are less exclusive the further progress we make. How may it potentially feel to blur the lines between what is typically off limits to the people under the observations? Or to be able to engage with the act of watching without having to concede a degree of privacy? How does the preservation of our security change if we were to adopt a perspective behind a camera instead of peer-to-peer monitoring in public spaces? The current

question I have that I feel would be interesting to explore in my dissertation in relation to this is “*How does the modern applications of Panopticism’s values affect how we engage with the world and express perspective?*”

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