

BA Documentary Photography and Visual Activism

Research in Context (ADAD5003/C)

ESSAY

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consider how image makers have utilised digital technology to explore the Surveillance State, technology, and Conflict.

Photographers operate digital technology to document the realities of the Surveillance State, also to engage viewers in critical discussions about the impact of technology on society and the potential consequences of unchecked surveillance and conflict.

In an increasingly surveilled society, imagemakers engage with themes that invite viewers to reconsider their relationship with digital platforms and the implications of living in a monitored environment. Advancements in technology have enabled complex surveillance capabilities, the margin between legitimate surveillance and infringement on privacy is something imagemakers investigate and narrate within their practice. Public perceptions of the surveillance state are multi-faceted, depending on the individual.

Imagemakers create a place for open discussion and interpretation on these divergent ideas.

Personal information can be collated and disseminated without our consent, publicly available data is intended to serve purpose and oversight for security and law enforcement – abuse of this leads to an infringement of privacy rights creating debates about the ethical, legal, and social implications of surveillance in a contemporary society. Imagemakers like Paolo Cirio challenge this abuse of power.

In Cirio's project 'Street Ghosts' he utilises digital technology to create life-sized images of the public captured by google street view, he then installs the captured subject in the place they were originally photographed and exploited by google. Unintentionally, the 'street ghosts' have evaded the systems automated blurring technology [1] – therefor exploiting their privacy. Although these images lack resolution and detail Cirio argues that the images still expose a person's identity, explaining that 'the rest of their bodies, their hair or clothes are more than enough to identify them, especially for someone really interested in their personal lives.'



Subject 1

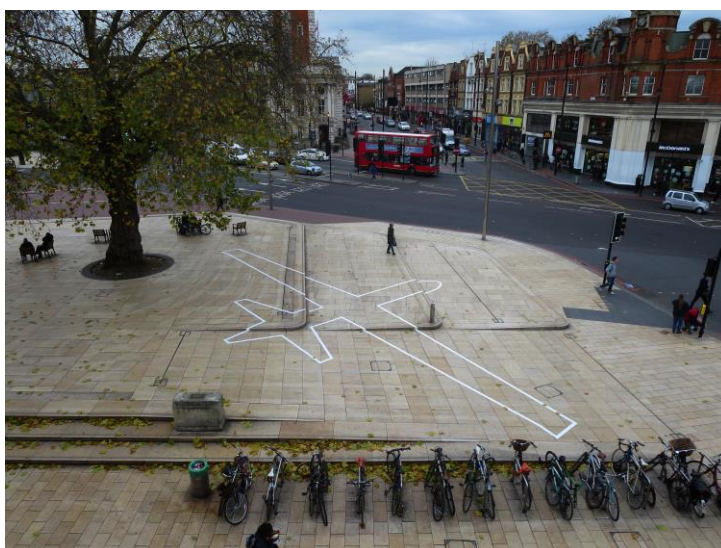
The multinational company appropriates imagery of all the world's towns and cities, evading tax [2] and exploiting and selling data that was created by people's activity and money [3] Cirio 'artistically explores the boundaries of ownership and exposure of this publicly displayed, privately held information about our personal lives'

Cirio's performance jinxes google in a calculated and gripping dance for control, Paolo re-contextualises accessible data and conflict instigating war between public and private interests in aims to win control on our intimacy and habits creating a Societal Panopticon (Lyon, 2001) of imagery. The subjects of exposure are unknowing to the documentation of their individual movements – and therefore not modifying their behaviour as a form of self-surveillance, due to the normalisation of surveillance practices - the individual expects to be monitored as an everyday routine part of life, or and individual has become accustomed to it. The collection of data exposing an individual's routine or a persons mediated way of life is imposing on their rights. Cirio re-contextualises the images peeled from the web of surveillance, introducing the image into an everyday perspective – influencing the title, 'Street Ghosts' he is directly referencing the ghostly presence of people photographed by google street view and the mark they have on the internet – google, therefor, has made a direct intrusion on their autonomy and dignity.

Technology has changed remarkably over the last century, enhancing the way we create, share, and consume images; Technology has never been so prevalent in our day-to-day lives. Bridles project 'drone shadows' highlights these recent advancements, engaging with the public via installation and performance to stimulate a dialogue about the ethical and legal implications of drone warfare. By interacting with spaces where people live, work, and commute the project invites an audience to consider the cyberespionage that often goes unnoticed. Disrupting the everyday landscape to engage with socio-political issues fosters a critical reflection about the role of technology in our futures.

James Bridle's 'Drone Shadows' raises awareness about the proliferation of drone warfare and its implications for surveillance, his collection of installations marked onto public spaces – based on the dimensions of drones used by military forces serving as a visual reminder of the hidden violence and surveillance capabilities of technology. Bridles' use of Media theory (McLuhan, 1964) and critical Geography (Harvey, 1990) as concept and framework within his work give insight to how space, place and territory are constructed and contested through technologies of surveillance and control. active engagement with public compounds highlights the complex Aesthetic Resistance (Butler, 2015) between technology and society.

Bridle uses actual dimensions of drones for his installations, the sensory and affective dimensions of the installation link to frameworks and discourses on affect, sensation, and the politics of perception (Massumi, 2002).



Subject 2

Imagemakers whose focus' are on 'the surveillance state' often come to heads with authoritarian regimes and censorship laws when creating controversial or politically charged art, imagemakers face scrutiny from audiences that could damage their reputations as artists. The risks taken when artists engage with themes like the surveillance state form a social commentary on political issues via artistic expression, contributing to public discourse. Some Imagemakers, particularly Documentary photographers and filmmakers, subject themselves to a level of danger when documenting the activities of the government or military. For example, War photographers.

In 2010, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin embedded themselves alongside the British Army's battalion, the royal regiment of Scotland, during an expedition to Afghanistan. Exposing themselves to life in a conflict zone with a military unit. *Along with their cameras, they took a roll of photographic paper, contained in a simple lightproof cardboard box.* Despite the fact that they were surrounded by conflict, the pair re-contextualised the space and documented 'the day nobody died,' intentionally highlighting the absence of violence (Foucault, 1977) – challenging the traditional notions of war photography.

'On the first day of their visit a BBC fixer was dragged from his car and executed, the following day, three British soldiers died, Casualties continued until the fifth day when nobody died. In response to each of these events, and also to a series of more mundane moments, such as a visit to the troops by the Duke of York and a press conference, all events a photographer would record, Broomberg & Chanarin instead unrolled a six-meter section of the paper and exposed it to the sun for 20 seconds. The results seen here deny the viewer the cathartic effect offered up by the conventional language of photographic responses to conflict and suffering.' [4]



Subject 3

While 'the day nobody died' does not explicitly address surveillance or technology, it explores broader themes of conflict, representation and perception that discuss the surveillance state and advancements in technology.

War and conflict are tangible consequences of violence and destruction, the medium used mirrors the fragility of human life in conflict (Sontag, 2003), Photographic paper is inherently vulnerable to decay – highlighting the ephemeral nature of the paper serving as a poignant reminder of the fleeting nature of life and the fragility of memory. In an age of surveillance Broomberg and Chanarin instigate broader discussion in documenting war, by documenting the complexities of military operations beyond the lens of sensationalism (Baudrillard, 1994), by using traditional image making techniques (considering the history of photographic paper as a medium) the pair create tactile engagement with their audience.

Technology has played a significant role in imagemakers adopting digital methods over traditional ones. Imagemakers alike Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin often fuse the mediums of digital and traditional methods to create complex and engaging collections like 'The day nobody died.'

Contemporary artist, Ai Weiwei explores themes of surveillance and technology in his installation 'surveillance camera with a plinth'. Weiwei transforms the installation space into symbolic recontextualization of surveillance, elevating a surveillance camera on a marble plinth, imitating that of what a sculpture or art-piece would sit atop. The heightened visibility engages the audience with the often hidden or veiled apparatus, in a prompt for viewers to confront the technology that monitors and regulates their behaviour, highlighting its omnipresence. Resonating with themes of power, authority and control.

Commenting on his choice of material for the sculpture/Installation, Ai remarks, 'Marble is of course a very important and rich material in art history. It tends to be the conventional material of monuments. I suppose you could say that the grass, the pushchair, the surveillance cameras are all part of a tradition of antimonuments as well: they're both monuments and antimonuments at the same time.' (Ai Weiwei in conversation with Tim Marlow in: Exh. Cat., London, Royal Academy of Arts, Ai Weiwei, September - December 2015, p. 27).

The marble plays a role on the commentary of the installation, the juxtaposition of subject and its material highlights the irony of using a prestigious material associated with power, authority and institutional control (marble was historically used to create sculptures of rulers, gods, and deities) to elevate a device used for monitoring and observation. These historical connotations, suggest that surveillance has become a modern-day symbol of control and authority in society.

Carved by traditional Chinese craftsmen, in the wake of the country's rapid and recent industrial revolution. It is a subject that Ai returns to often within his practice, in many ways, nuancing his Duchampian conceptual framework. [6]



Subject 4

UNFINISHED – REQUESTED EXTENSION ON THE 18TH YET TO BE APPROVED

Information collated from online sources

- [1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/09/technology/09iht-google09.html>
- [2] <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2185427/How-Google-avoided-paying-218m-tax-Internet-giants-cash-saving-deal-2-6bn-UK-earnings.html>
- [3] https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/23/business/an-inuit-village-too-remote-for-cars-gets-street-view.html?_r=1
- [4] <https://www.broombergchanarin.com/the-day-nobody-died-1-1#:~:text=The%20Day%20Nobody%20Died%20comprises,of%20the%20engaged%2C%20professiona%20witness.>

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Images

Subject 1 - Google Inc. (2009). Street View screenshot of 214 Lafayette Street, New York. [Screenshot]. Retrieved from [<https://paolocirio.net/work/street-ghosts/>]

Subject 2 - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/stml/11118410325/in/album-72157638179977306/>

Subject 3 - The Brother's Suicide, June 7, 2008 (detail), The Day Nobody Died, 2008, Unique C-type, 762mm x 6000mm [<https://www.broombergchanarin.com/the-day-nobody-died-1-1#:~:text=The%20Day%20Nobody%20Died%20comprises,of%20the%20engaged%2C%20professiona,%20witness.>]

Subject 4 - https://www.artnet.com/artists/ai-weiwei/surveillance-camera-and-plinth-O4yn9_MWInZPqzhS0gwH5A2

