

Virtual Panopticons: The Ethics of Observation in the Digital Age

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Contemporary “surveillance society,” with its ever-expanding regimes of public and private monitoring, demands ongoing and rigorous consideration of the politics and ethics of observation in the 21st century. Looking back through art history, surveillance has served as a perennial theme for the postwar avant-garde, from the involuntary participants of Bruce Nauman’s live-feed video corridors, to the peephole voyeurism enacted by Marcel Duchamp’s *Étants Donnés*. But for artists working today, surveillance and the voyeuristic gaze have taken on new significance and urgency with the rise of digital media. With social networking sites like Facebook, that promote both voyeuristic observation and exhibitionist self-display, to Google’s pursuit of a global panoptic gaze via cross-referencing and integration of public and private data, surveillance has become a pervasive, if not dominant, characteristic of contemporary life.

British-born, Seattle-based artist James Coupe examines the power and meaning of surveillance in our everyday life by working with advanced surveillance technologies, including high definition video cameras, facial recognition software, and computer algorithms derived from popular search engines and social media sites. Coupe works in new media but his artistic practice is anchored in an engagement with older media—namely, cinema, literature, and, most recently, the panorama. Situated at the intersection of the virtual, the fictional, and the real, Coupe’s work examines the ways that contemporary surveillance society simultaneously foregrounds self-observation and mutual observation, and thus mobilizes the classic scopophilic dialectic of voyeurism and exhibitionism. But, rather than subjecting surveillance to a systematic ideological critique in the manner of so-called tactical media activists and many other contemporary artists who invoke surveillance, Coupe’s interests lie in the way surveillance provides a theme and metaphor for exploring the paradoxes of the postmodern human condition.



Coupe's specific approach to surveillance emerges more clearly upon consideration of two recent projects. The first, *(re)collector*, was a 2007 public art installation in Cambridge, UK, involving a system of CCTV cameras that recorded footage over the course of four days. The cameras were programmed to capture specific activities that replicate scenes from Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film "Blow-Up," for instance, a man walking through a park, or a person taking photographs, as seen here. Using Antonioni's film as a narrative template, a computerized algorithm organized the footage, and then applied subtitles borrowed from Julio Cortazar's "Las Babas del Diablo," the short story that "Blow-Up" was based upon. Because *(re)collector* was a public art installation, it offered the local residents the opportunity to intentionally adapt their behaviors in order to appear in the final films. Thus, combining Cortazar's literary narrative with Antonioni's cinematic adaptation and surveillance footage of ordinary public activities, Coupe produced an open system governed by rules and codes but infused with chance and interactivity.

Furthermore, by linking surveillance footage specifically with cinematic spectatorship, Coupe draws out the dialectical tension between voyeurism and exhibitionism that drives the desire to look and be looked at. His work seems to insist that to consider surveillance as strictly a mechanism of social control would fail to recognize how the desire to watch is inextricably bound to our desire to be watched, and most

importantly, is driven by an even deeper desire for social relationality and connection. Coupe is thus less interested in the disciplinary effects of surveillance than with how these technologies of observation have become a kind of second nature, and how we, as subjects of surveillance, have over time become virtuosic practitioners of those same technologies that organize and regulate our lives.

Coupe's next major project, "Today, too, I experienced something I hope to understand in a few days," is a Facebook application that utilizes the same types of algorithmic functions that organize the social network's demographic profiling. The project borrows its name from Danish filmmaker Jorgen Leth's 1970 experimental film "The Perfect Human," which some may know as the subject of Lars von Trier's 2003 documentary, "The Five Obstructions." Coupe's facebook application assembles short, split-screen films in which YouTube videos are juxtaposed with individual video portraits that Coupe edits to replicate the style Leth's original film. Then, user-generated facebook status updates supply the subtitles. Each component is related through common metadata tags, keywords, and demographic information—for instance, a status update about "dogs" authored by a 43 year old woman supplies the narrative for a the video portrait of a similarly aged woman plus a Youtube video featuring a dog. Coupe calls the project "site-specific" because it uses the social networking site as both a medium and what he calls a "new kind of social space." This new space is governed by the mutually reinforcing drives of voyeurism and exhibitionism, where the panoptic gaze is both projected out and invited in, where surveillance is both medium and message.

In Coupe's most recent project, this dialectical tension between voyeurism and exhibitionism is mapped onto the joint technologies of the panopticon and the panorama. In *Panoptic Panorama #1: I am standing in an empty room*, installed last month at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, a cylindrical arrangement of five cameras is positioned in the center of the gallery, with the camera lenses panoptically configured to monitor a 360-degree field of view. The captured footage is displayed on a row of five monitors that produce a panoramic representation of the gallery via the video feeds. Computers process the video footage in real time and filters out any footage that captures a moving body. As a result, the gallery will tend to appear empty on-screen, regardless of the number of people in the space. But, when people remain still for more than about

thirty seconds, the video feed is sporadically interrupted by flickerings of human presence, pointing to the discrepancy between what is physically present in the gallery and what is shown on screen. Because the software works to eliminate moving bodies from the panoramic view, the viewer is denied the narcissistic pleasure of self-observation in real time. Yet, in spite of the viewer's exclusion from the panorama at the level of representation, the viewer's movement in the gallery is in fact determining how the software constructs the panorama from moment to moment.



In these and other projects, Coupe reflects on how surveillance technologies enable new modes of observation, and considers how these technologies might respond to and even produce certain social behaviors and desires. In Coupe's own words: "In order to make art that can reveal new aspects of ourselves, we cannot continue to paint pictures of reality, or simply appropriate its existing signifiers. Rather, we must start authoring the real, working directly with our society's vast data-driven systems rather than simply representing them via inferior media." Preferring direct "authorship" of the real to a critical representation of it, Coupe distinguishes himself from other contemporary artists

who regard surveillance as an external eye-of-power that monitors and regulates everything under its purview—or in other words, as primarily a disciplinary apparatus.

These themes continue in Coupe's forthcoming exhibition at the Phillips Museum of Art at Franklin and Marshall College (or F+M) in Lancaster, PA. The project entails the installation of a system of high definition cameras enabled with facial recognition software across the F+M campus. Additionally, students will be encouraged to film and upload their own YouTube-style videos, countering the institutional gaze of the fixed cameras and enabling the watched to become the watchers. Algorithms will be applied to the collected footage, organizing it into narrative sequences based on German author Friedrich Duerrenmatt's novella, *Der Auftrag* or "The Assignment,". Duerrenmatt's story is about a filmmaker who is hired to make a documentary about the mysterious circumstances surrounding a woman's gruesome murder in the desert of an unnamed North African country. The filmmaker soon realizes she is under constant surveillance, just as the murdered woman had been before her death. Coupe names his installation after "The Assignment"'s lengthy subtitle, "On the Observing of the Observer of the Observers," to highlight the central theme of watching, being watched, and the circuitous dynamic between the two.

Next spring, the Phillips Museum's galleries will be transformed into the underground surveillance bunker that is featured in the climax of Duerrenmatt's book, but with the bunker's rooms re-imagined as different locations on the F+M campus — dorm rooms, classrooms, offices—effectively blurring the distinction between the museum installation and the surrounding institutional spaces of the college. These rooms will also contain monitors and surveillance cameras, which will record additional footage to be inserted into the narrative sequences—once again, enabling the observed to become the observers. The installation layout recalls Foucault's description of the panoptic penitentiary, in which the prison cells resemble "so many small theatres." Yet, instead of erecting a centralized apparatus from which an all-seeing eye can survey the panoramic *mise-en-scene*, Coupe's architectural configuration of cameras and monitors is decentralized, dispersed, labyrinthine—resulting in a picture that is more *mise-en-abyme* than *mise-en-scene*.

The F+M campus provides an ideal setting for Coupe's intervention, not only because it offers an enclosed "set" and captive population of "actors" and "viewers," observers and observed. The project has site-specific relevance due to the fact that Lancaster, Pennsylvania has recently garnered national attention as the most "surveilled" city in the United States. With a network of over 165 CCTV cameras and about 54,000 residents, Lancaster City has earned the dubious distinction of having more cameras per capita than any other city in the nation. The city's CCTV network emerged from a somewhat murky alliance of public and private interests that took shape around 2003, and even though local citizen's groups and even the ACLU have voiced objections, the cameras have not met widespread resistance or serious legal opposition.

Since Coupe's project is still in its initial stages, the public's reaction remains to be seen. By pointing out the ubiquity of surveillance in everyday life, and particularly, by situating itself in the institutional space of a liberal arts college campus that maintains social distance between itself and the surrounding urban environment, the project is poised to re-open the debate surrounding the city's cameras and the college's own CCTV system. While the controversial aspects of Coupe's project are apparent, its broader political implications are less explicit or predetermined. Instead of rehearsing the familiar critical assessment of surveillance society, Coupe creates open systems wherein the viewer generates meaning through participation, allowing for more complex interrogation of our reciprocal involvement with surveillance in our everyday lives.

As Foucault has suggested, the disciplinary effects of the panoptic gaze derive from an unequal distribution of observability, what Jacques Alain-Miller has called the "brutal dissymmetry of visibility" between the watcher and the watched. How, then, might these effects be resisted, or even reversed, with a more equal distribution of observability—whereby the observers become the observed? Philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Paul Virilio have argued that disciplinary society has been supplanted by the society of control, which has entailed shifts in the operations and prominence of surveillance. Put simply, in the society of control, the centralized, unidirectional gaze of the panopticon has been dispersed across an extended, networked field of watchers and watched, a situation that implies greater reciprocity and increased access to information,

and thus provides the deceptive appearance of greater “freedom,” when in fact the disciplinary gaze has simply been internalized beyond recognition.

In response to this critique, what if we were to imagine that the surveillance logic of “total visibility” could actually increase political, cultural, and economic transparency, and thus to a more open, accessible, and fully-realized democracy? This controversial proposal has recently been put forth by the ethical philosopher Peter Singer, who channels Jeremy Bentham when he states that the “inspection principle, universally applied, could also be the perfection of democracy, the device that allows us to know what our governments are really doing, that keeps tabs on corporate abuses, and that protects our individual freedoms just as it subjects our personal lives to public scrutiny.”¹ The hitch, Singer provocatively suggests, is that we must give up our attachment to *privacy* as an inalienable right and, implicitly, as a coveted form of private property, in order for the democratizing potential of these technologies to be fully realized. While I don’t have time here to fully explore the implications of this argument in light of recent global events at Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park, I welcome questions about this in the question and answer period.

Importantly, Singer’s argument hinges on the same idea of “the observers becoming the observed” that is thematized in both Duerrenmatt’s book and in Coupe’s work. Both acknowledge that the gaze of surveillance is no longer confined to the panoptic tower, nor does it reside somewhere above and apart from ourselves. Thus, to “resist” surveillance would require repressing our own desire to watch and be watched. By engaging the scopic economy of surveillance as a dialectic, entailing both voyeurism and exhibitionism, Coupe’s work suggests that the negative consequences of these technologies cannot be avoided simply through recourse to the right to privacy.

In this, Coupe affirms the literary insights of Duerrenmatt, who regarded surveillance not just as simply a threat to privacy, but as constitutive of the modern human condition. Duerrenmatt writes: “A very suitable definition of contemporary man might be that he is man under observation.” In as much as surveillance inspires anxiety and paranoia, we have also become accustomed to it, even dependent on it for validation. Being under observation, Duerrenmatt argues, gives meaning and purpose to our

¹ “Visible Man: Ethics in a World Without Secrets,” Harper’s Magazine, August 2011

activities; and, in turn, to be completely unobserved would make man feel insignificant and alone, leaving one “staggering along in the mad hope of somehow finding someone to be observed by somewhere.” He identifies this desire to be watched as the root cause of geopolitical conflict—the global arms race, religious fundamentalisms, terrorist violence. Though “The Assignment” was written in 1986, at the dawn of the so-called digital age, Duerrenmatt anticipates the ethical and political paradoxes that accompany our increasingly mediated and monitored lives, while also diagnosing the mix of paranoia and dependency that exemplifies contemporary attitudes to what we might reductively call “surveillance society.” The work of James Coupe helps us understand why Duerrenmatt’s book is even more relevant today, at a moment defined by Wikileaks’ scandalous revelations and the UC-Davis pepper spray videos, when the world is watching like never before.