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Life in the Age of Voyeurism

When I first approached the topic of surveillance in the context of this project I thought myself knowledgeable. I work with technology. Some of my artwork is reliant on cameras and their capabilities, lens theory, CMOS, the like. When a Boston Globe article, written at the time of the Democratic National Convention (DNC) claimed that a walk from the Seaport Hotel on the Boston waterfront to the FleetCenter would cause you to pass thirty-three surveillance cameras (Ranalli and Klein, 2004), I thought, “Surely this is the work of the Liberal Media.” Once again we are being told to panic, to change focus away from our lives and into the so-called “news”.

I came up with a plan. I would count the cameras on the Boston leg of my commute. I happen to know already that there were five. I would then look around South Station, and then take the walk from the Seaport to the Fleet Center myself.

“21”

The last fifteen minutes of my daily commute are spent walking through the city, from South Station to Boylston Street on Boston Common. It is in this fifteen minute period on

Thursday April 27th that I counted twenty-one cameras, and fell into the field of view of fifteen of them during my walk. One camera per minute¹.

I was stunned to say the least. I understood that there were a few cameras in Chinatown, from when I lived on South Street in the late Nineties. There were problems with crime. My original assessment came from knowing about those cameras, and knowing that Boston had added cameras to some of the traffic light poles when the DNC came to town. The first thought that came to mind was, what an incredible amount of resources. In less than half a kilometer there were twenty cameras watching me. Watching Me. They were supposed to be watching criminals – they were supposed to prevent crime. Why was I being monitored in my day to day activity? My self or anyone? What could I possibly do about this? I decided to photograph *them*. I would get as close as I could and photograph them. I could tell everyone about them. I could map them, and “eyeball” them² – record information on the type and disposition of the cameras and their controllers and publish it to the web. I would engage in inverse-surveillance or *sousveillance* – “The view from beneath contrasting the view from above³.”

The first question was - Who was doing the watching? There were a few private security cameras, “button” style cameras meant to watch shops and entry-ways. Then there were what I believed to be the state/federal related cameras. Lastly, there were the business cameras. My principle concern was the state camera network. Second was the business network. Given the disposition of the United States after September 11th, I sought to first answer the question as to why there were not any cameras overlooking the arriving trains.

I was particularly discouraged by this. After the March 11th attacks in Spain, I could not understand why the state would want to watch me wander into a sandwich shop out on Lincoln Street, but had no interest as to the goings-on around the trains themselves. I would also take a look at the Bus station portion and Red Line train station elements of South Station. Camera and shotlist in hand, I set out to watch the watchers.

Enter the Panopticon

My questions were answered quickly when I looked at South Station for the first time with my new eyes – the eyes that had counted 21 cameras on my way to work.

All the train platforms converge on an open-air thoroughfare which is beneath an awning. Down the length of one side of the thoroughfare are the entrances to the station building. At one end there is an entrance from the street. At the other, an transit security observation deck. The observation deck is at the main intersection of the other platforms, and can see down the entire thoroughfare. It is a small elevated building. The windows are made of black glass.

So there weren't any cameras because there were people. People watched the platforms and the trains, the comings and goings of thousands of people each day. Or at least that is what they wanted us to believe.

“Bentham’s *Panopticon* is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open into the inner side of the ring.” (Foucault, 1975)

At the “periphery” was all of us – the citizen commuters – “at the centre” was the observation deck, which had a full view of the station platforms from its black windows. This design put the security in the public (out in the open), where everyone had to see it (elevated). It existed within the acknowledgement of all. Perhaps people would eventually ignore it as it became accepted. But it is too imposing to be ignored.

“Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers” (Foucault, 1975)

I am stunned. The fact that I am reading this from a book called “*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*” doesn’t help. This can’t be why this little building on stilts is sitting out in the middle of South Station. Surely it was convenience. It must have been a part of when they planted all those trees. One example – no matter how perfect – could not serve by itself as proof.

But what if it were true? Where does that place us as people and where does that put our society? We perceive ourselves as free. How can we be free if we are under constant, or under the perception of constant, scrutiny? It was time to go find some evidence to confirm or deny Foucault and Bentham’s involvement in the design of this major New England transportation hub.

I used to take the bus, a long time ago, to get to Boston. After that, but before moving to

my current commute, I took the Red Line train from Cambridge. In short, each of these facilities now had arrangements similar to the South Station train platform.

The Bus Station has a rotunda that is studded with cameras. The main and only entrance into and out of this facility takes you by “Bus Station Security” which resides behind a wall of thick glass beyond which are stacked a dozen television screens displaying the activity of the entire Bus Station – within and without. It is there that I saw the view from the camera that overlooked the train yard. The camera was about four feet beneath a large window to the left of the Bus Station Security office, on the outside of the building. The view I had approximated the view from the camera. I was half way through shooting the infra-red version of the train yard panorama when a security guard, sandwich in hand, came out of the office and shouted me out of the window area.

The same would prove true at the Red Line portions of the station, with less dramatic results. The upstairs interface to the rest of South Station and the exits to the main streets in the Financial District all intersected before some sort of security office which seemed a hybrid of the main observation deck at the train platform, and the more formal office of the bus station. Once again, everyone needed to pass before this location in order to go about their business, whatever it may be. Of interesting note is that in the three times I stopped by this structure in as many days, it was either empty or had one person wandering around inside it. For these three structures to be so apparent and public could only have one justification. That they were not protected and out of view, behind thick walls in an undisclosed location, was proof that the control they exerted was not physical.

In his conclusion in *The Anarchist in the Library* Siva Vaidhyanathan, when speaking on surveillance technology, asks “If this technological intervention is effective ... is there a less intrusive way to achieve the same results?” I think we now have an answer in this context. What is less intrusive than actually observing us is to simply make us *feel* observed. That “the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” as previously stated from Foucault.

The design of these very public spaces was in fact based on theories of behavioral control. Whether it was the Democratic National Convention or the attacks of September 11th, these buildings had become prisons, and there didn't seem to be any location on my commute through the city that I went unobserved. Could they do this? The Electronic Frontier Foundation refers to a report *Public Video Surveillance: Is It An Effective Crime Prevention Tool?* (Nieto, 1997) in which a California Court held in the case of *Aisensio vs. American Broadcasting Co., Inc.* that “the videotaping of an individual on a public street does not constitute an unreasonable intrusion into that person's solitude.”

(220 Cal. App. 3rd 146 2nd Dist. 1990). Additionally, this report stated that significant duress must be found on part of plaintiff as a direct result of the surveillance before First Amendment rights would be brought into question. We must keep in mind that this report was before 2001, showing that the allowances and perhaps acceptance of surveillance was established before the Department of Homeland Security was.

The amount of surveillance of public space continues to build at an alarming rate in the

metropolitan Boston area. Last Summer, the city of Chelsea announced that they would install 24/7 surveillance in thirty-four locations around the 4.6 square kilometer city (Smalley, 2004). This would give Chelsea an observational density of 1 camera per every 12x12 meter area, or roughly 1/137 m².

The EFF cited report went on to state that local government agencies were working in conjunction with business entities to form video surveillance partnerships. At the time of the report programs existed within Baltimore, Tampa Bay and Memphis. The businesses benefit from the police responsiveness, the police benefit from the observation granted within and around business establishments.

While sitting for coffee it hit me: we are observed, and we observe ourselves – and each other. What people in the Red Scare of the 1950s were loathe to do, we do willingly. We “fink”. We “out” each other. We stand before cameras and use cards – credit, debit, gift, coffee – and encode personal data into the network while the silent judge and jury looks on. We do the work for them. When we stand before a camera and declare “Triple Grande Caramel Macchiato, Skim Milk, No Whip,” we are encoding a stream of data into a video, a cash register, and a customer database creating a unique fingerprint, a retrievable resource. If we use a gift card, even more data is given to the corporate authorities, data of previous purchases and if the gift card was purchased with a credit card, relationships can be established or at least inferred. This seems to be common knowledge, though it goes unchallenged. What is worse is when we go to a website to buy a gift and have it delivered, or go to a “free” online greeting card website, we are also submitting data on our friends and relations. In the latter case we are in fact *paying* for

the greeting card service with the currency of information, whether it is ours, our associates, or more typically both⁴.

Public Response

The public response runs hot and cold. The American Civil Liberties Union maintains four points against video surveillance: that it has not been proven effective, is susceptible to abuse, lacks limits and controls, and will have a negative effect on public life.

(ACLU 2002) Being embedded in the commuter community, I speak with my fellow travelers. The notion that they are being kept safe, and that there are others “just doing their jobs” is status quo. It is generally accepted that we are being observed, and that “that’s what you have to do” to prevent terrorism or crime.

I cannot say that we properly differentiate between *prevention* and *observation* of crime in this regard. How can we claim that a given technology prevents something that it, and we, cannot observe? If two cars try to pass one another on the highway and suddenly swerve, we can say that there was nearly an accident. If we watch people walk in and out of a store on a video monitor all day and no crimes were committed, we cannot say that there was nearly a crime. Furthermore, the majority of news items that make reference to security cameras refer to them in the observation of a crime that was committed, and the role that the camera footage played in apprehending the criminal – not the role the camera played in preventing the crime that it observed taking place⁵.

The Sousveillance Community

The notion of Sousveillance is attributed to Juvenal's "Quid custodiet ipsos custodes?" Literally *Who will guard the guards themselves?* Or more popularly⁶ "Who will watch the watchers?" Wired magazine ran an article four years ago asking specifically for readers to "Record the Lens that Records You" (DiJusto, 2002). This was based on the efforts of Ronald Deibert from the University of Toronto calling for a World Sousveillance Day⁷ on December 24th – being the most popular shopping day of the year in North America. Sousveillance is supposed to be the converse to surveillance, an *inverse surveillance*. But where Sur-veillance is literally "the view from above", Sous-veillance is the view from underneath. Given the definition within Foucault of our current standing in regard to being monitored, underneath is not just how I was feeling, but how I literally was in the course of much of my observations in the formulation of this project.

There are productive uses of this inverse surveillance as well. John Young is the author of the website Cryptome.org, which was launched in 2002⁸. John Young, on the submission portion of the site best summarizes the apparent mission of Cryptome:

"Cryptome welcomes documents for publication that are prohibited by governments worldwide, in particular material on freedom of expression, privacy, cryptology, dual-use technologies, national security, intelligence, and secret governance -- open, secret and classified documents -- but not limited to those."

Young goes on to state that information or documents may be removed "only by order served directly by a US court having jurisdiction." And that to date, no such orders have been served. There is a companion site to Cryptome, mentioned earlier, called eyeball-series.org, where Young and others post their direct observations or other recovered visual evidence of governmental installations and activities that range from weapons

tests, to security installations, and military/surveillance hardware construction and delivery.

Because of the nature of Cryptome's endeavors – to make public the information and imagery prohibited by governments – many view the websites as “anti-war” and “anti-government” . The FBI has visited Cryptome and Young, and stating in a report from Young on the visit:

“SA [Special Agent] Renner said there is no investigation of Cryptome, that the purpose of the visit was to ask Cryptome to report to the FBI any information which Cryptome "had a gut feeling" could be a threat to the nation.

There was a discussion of the purpose of Cryptome, freedom of information, the need for more public information on threats to the nation and what citizens can do to protect themselves, the need for more public information about how the FBI functions in the field and the intention of visits like the one today.”

While the FBI seems to be approaching such a popular effort with caution, other critics have directed stronger words at Young and others in their efforts.

In March 2005 Reader's Digest contributor Michael Crowley wrote an article calling for Cryptome and sites like it to be shut down. Crowley seems convinced that the efforts of Young do not serve the greater good by keeping government in line, but that there are simply people “who get a thrill exposing dangerous facts.” I should suggest to Mr. Crowley to count the number of cameras during his next lunch break.

Conclusions

The efforts of these individuals to highlight the extent of our surveillance is staggering in proportion. They live this. I find myself squinting a lot in public places now. Although I won't go out of my way to avoid a camera, since I think it is possibly useless to try, and unmanned to boot, I do not feel comforted living in the designs of oppression.

What can I do? For starters, I am compiling this report. I am going to publish it on the web. I am going to take all of my accrued sousveillance work and put it up on my website under a Creative Commons license. Additionally as I complete work on the panoramic images captured during my observations, I will post them to communities like Flickr. I will keep an eye on EFF action alerts and write my congresspeople immediately at the first sign of any further intention to intrude on my life. These efforts are the best an individual can hope to achieve.

In so doing, I hope to answer Juvenal's rhetorical question: *A populum, bonum commune communitatis* – The watchers shall be watched by the people, for the good of the community.

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¹ See http://www.bretorium.com/one_camera_per_minute.html

² For more information on eyeballing see <http://eyeball-series.org/>

³ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sousveillance>

⁴ See https://www.bluemountain.com/members/register.pd?app=myaccount&purl=www.bluemountain.com/index_ec.pd

⁵ See http://www.680news.com/news/local/article.jsp?content=20060424_112452_4960
<http://www.thebostonchannel.com/news/9072927/detail.html>

<http://www.komotv.com/stories/42799.htm>

<http://www.heraldtribune.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060426/NEWS/604260323>

⁶ For more on the interchangeability of *guard* and *watch* in the Latin noun *Custos* see:
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/lexindex?lookup=custos&lang=la&type=exact&formentry=0>

⁷ WSD (World {Sousveillance, Subjectrights} Day)
<http://wearcam.org/wsd.htm>

⁸ Registry information obtained from:
<http://www.networksolutions.com/whois/index.jsp>