

**Thomas Y. Levin | Surveillance, Aesthetics, Literacy**

What might it mean to engage in counter-measures with regard to surveillance? One literal response would be to cover one's face. Indeed, the masked visage was a hotly-debated topic in Germany of the 1970s and 1980s, given its at least potential function as a low-tech form of resistance to the ubiquitous police and secret-service monitoring of political demonstrations (an example of which is documented in a memorable sequence from Michael Klier's 1983 surveillance compilation essay film *Der Riese* [The Giant]). Can a fragile democracy tolerate the anonymous public expression of dissent of the sort that makes it impossible to distinguish 'peaceful' demonstrators from 'hardcore militants'? Definitely not, according to the German juridical system which introduced into law on July 18, 1985 the so-called *Vermummungsgesetz* (paragraph 17a of the legal code), making it illegal to obscure the face in any way that compromises the ability "to establish identity" (by wearing a ski mask or a scarf, for example) or even to carry on your person items which could be used to that effect. This is the context of Jürgen Klauke's *Antlitze* [Faces] (1972/2000), a grid of ninety-six found newspaper images of faces that are, in one way or another, masked. Although the types in this visual archive range widely—from the 1972 Munich Olympic terrorists to grass-roots anti-nuclear protestors—they become almost interchangeable in their shared adoption of the surveillance-frustrating political veil. What this anti- or counter-physiognomic collection makes visible, however, is the very politics of visibility, of the face and its readability—in short, of identification.

A similar rendering readable of the stakes of surveillant capture is at work in the Institute for Applied Autonomy's 2001 *iSee* project, an on-line application that enables users to elude the increasingly ubiquitous closed-circuit television [CCTV] surveillance cameras in operation throughout New York City. Based on a map of Manhattan prepared by the New York chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, that meticulously documents the location and orientation of the (mostly private) CCTV cameras directed onto so-called public space, *iSee* provides an interface that displays, for any desired metropolitan itinerary, the "route

of least surveillance.” Despite its playfulness, the project was conceived explicitly as an altogether serious provocation, formulated by the IAA collective with characteristic succinctness in the following terms:

As private interests cynically exploit public fears to undermine civil liberties in the name of social control and corporate profits, there is a growing need for dissidents to raise public awareness and to undermine directly the capabilities of these interests. *iSee* is an attempt to engage CCTV and its proponents on both these fronts.<sup>1</sup> The politics of (in-)visibility that here informs a desire to maintain the anonymity so classically associated with the urban condition is also central to Knowbotic Research’s 2006 installation *Be prepared! Tiger!* Here the model of a Tamil Tiger guerilla boat (whose stealth-bomber inspired crystalline shape supposedly renders it all but invisible to traditional radar) stages invisibility as an explicit insurgent tactic.

If Klauke’s faces can be read as an archive of popular resistance, the IAA’s *iSee* project functions as an updated pragmatics of the veil, albeit one that enables users to elude, not the identifying eye of the State as Big Brother, but rather the invasive gaze of that archive of real-time quotidianity, generated by the sum of surveillance cameras in operation at any one time in an urban landscape like Manhattan. It is this archive that is implied in the title of Denis Beaubois’s marvelous 1996-97 performance video *In the event of amnesia the city will recall*, in which the artist stands perfectly still in the middle of a busy Sydney mall while staring down and attempting to engage the CCTV camera monitoring this space. The real-time durational record constituted by the fantasmatic synthesis of the totality of urban surveillance—here anthropomorphized as the city’s memory—catalogues the mundane spaces and activities that make up the daily life of a city. Just as Klier’s *The Giant* taught us how to read the narratives that can be extracted from or, better, constituted by this archive, it was Pat Naldi and Wendy Kirkup’s choreographed walks in *Search* (1993/1996) that mined the *dispositif* for its performative potential, by using the soon-to-become-ubiquitous pan-tilt-zoom CCTV system in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (the first city center in the UK to have installed such a multi-camera system) to “document” their metropolitan *flaneurie*.

This is without doubt an *aestheticization of surveillance*, but not necessarily in the pejorative sense that would claim it trivializes the politics of this technological transformation of the public sphere through an inconsequential formalism. Rather it is an aestheticization in the original Greek sense of the term *aesthesis*, which is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “of or pertaining to sensuous perception, received by the senses.” For what Kirkup and Naldi’s intervention did—and not only by virtue of the fact that the series of

20-second-long silent, jerky, grainy black-and-white video pieces were broadcast on commercial TV, where their 'low' production values regularly disrupted the 'normal' 'flow' of post-production televisual slickness—was to render *visible*, i.e. make available to the senses, the existence and the capacities of this surveillance system and especially its worrisome capacity (through post-production) to imply contiguities, proximities, exchanges and encounters that in fact never actually took place. While by no means an unambivalent gesture—the advertising of the capacities of a police CCTV system, in however ostensibly harmless a fashion, is of course also instrumental in promoting its panoptic functioning—nevertheless the production of an awareness of the system is also a step towards what one could call *surveillant literacy*, an informed and critical awareness of the complex issues involved in the range of practices and technologies of surveillance. This in turn is, I would insist, the condition of possibility, of a more substantive, nuanced and intelligent response to surveillance of the sort that is very much needed today.

Central to the project of a surveillant literacy is what one could call the pedagogy of the surveillant sensorium, i.e. developing the perceptual skills needed to “read” surveillance in its many different manifestations. This can take the form of Dan Graham’s *Yesterday, Today* (1975) in which a live local image feed is mated perfectly with the sound from the same feed recorded exactly 24 hours earlier, thereby staging in disarmingly simple fashion the degree to which we just take for granted—without having any way to really verify—the synchronicity of the audio-visual tracks in surveillance video. A different lesson in the subtle hermeneutics of the panoptic can be found in Jonas Dahlberg’s playful mobilization of the toilet-cam topos, as a means to reveal the (extremely serious) issue of the elusive intelligibility of *scale* in the real-time video-surveillance feed. In his *Safe Zones, no. 7 (The Toilets at ZKM)* of 2001, we are confronted by our *inability* to recognize the fact that while the CCTV images of toilets we see in the hallway of the museum really are in fact “live” broadcasts from the bathroom stalls next door, the cameras inside the bathrooms are only transmitting images of crude miniature mock-ups of the actual spaces they appear to be “observing.” Our inability to distinguish this surveillant simulacrum—even after repeated viewings—teaches an important lesson about the polysemous character of the CCTV feed.

Combining in striking fashion the multiple stakes of aestheticization—issues of visibility, legibility and, here, also beauty—Laura Kurgan’s important *Monochrome Landscapes* (2004) invoke the color fields of mid-

20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction as a seductive means to pose urgent issues regarding the politics of resolution and pixel legibility raised by the dramatic increase in civilian access to high-resolution satellite imaging. What can be seen from space, by whom, and what sort of new hermeneutic skills are needed to make sense of such images? From the satellite image that allows one to read a tiny line in a green expanse of forest as the distinctive trace of illegal logging, to the Bureau of Inverse Technology's 1999 *Bit Plane*, a proto-drone hobby-toy on steroids outfitted with real-time video transmission that provides aerial video capture of off-limits corporate landscapes, the practice of *rendering visible* and training the new perceptual skills required by these visibilities is a persistent concern of many contemporary politically-engaged artwork. None more dramatically than the exposure of covert U.S. military and CIA "black ops" sites in both the scholarly and hyper-tele-photographic components of Trevor Paglen's "geography of the classified universe".<sup>2</sup> In all of these cases what is at stake is a *rendering visible* or, in other words, an urgently needed aestheticization in the sense of a *phenomenalization*. A similar tactic of what one could call *militant aesthesis* is also at work in that most direct and literal of surveillant counter-measures, the "sous-veillance" of Steve Mann's *Shooting Back* project, in which individuals engage spaces of aggressive surveillance (shopping malls, Walmart stores, etc) sporting stylish "wearcam" backpacks, shoulder bags or even bustiers outfitted with mirrored glass domes which ostensibly contain a surveillance camera that is beaming its images wirelessly back to a remote base station. Of course in true panoptic fashion the inability to definitively establish whether any particular unit is actually functioning is central to its 'successful' operation. Here the scopic asymmetry of the surveillant condition is countered by creating the counter-shot, a reversing of the vector that threatens to make visible the spaces, agents and stakes of quotidian panopticism.

But nowhere is aesthesis as counter-measure more urgent than in the general project of rendering phenomenal the by definition non-phenomenal locus of the state of the art of surveillance today—the domain of dataveillance. Paradigmatic in this regard is the pioneering 2002 *Carnivore* project by the Radical Software Group, which sought to call attention to the FBI's controversial DCS1000 packet-sniffing software, known by the code names Omnivore and Carnivore, whose existence only came to light in October 2000 as a result of a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit filed by the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC). The RSG's ingenious solution to the challenge of how to stage, for public scrutiny, a previously secret program employed for clandestine email snooping, was to make the source code available to a group of artist-programmers (such as Cory Arcangel,

Scott Snibbe, Marc Napier and many others) each of whom wrote “applications” that, in very different ways, served to “animate, diagnose or interpret” the network traffic. Visitors to the installation—first shown at the *Anxious Omniscience: Surveillance and Contemporary Cultural Practice* exhibition at the Princeton University Art Museum in early 2002—encountered the guts of a fully functioning “sniff-net” computer encased in molded transparent plexiglass—here too a rendering visible of the usually enclosed “insides” of such technology—below a flat screen monitor on which an intercepted data stream was being “visualized” in real time. The various RSG ‘clients’ translated the output of this electronic wiretap into constantly evolving venn-diagrams, Jackson Pollock-like abstractions, or, in the version programmed by Golan Levin, into a face whose physiognomic features would be modified based on an analysis of the emotional ‘temperature’ of the intercepted email. Once again, as in the classic function of surveillance in political demonstrations, it is a matter of identifying a visage, but here in a manner reminiscent of Nancy Burson’s *Warhead* portraits from the early 1980s—composite photographs made from the faces of world leaders, weighted according to the relative strength of their nuclear arsenals (so, for example, *Warhead I* was composed of 55% Reagan, 45% Brezhnev and less than 1% each of Thatcher, Mitterrand and Deng). Just as these “portraits” were effectively *political* physiognomies which functioned as ciphers that made visible the “face” of nuclear power, the various clients of the *Carnivore* project also mobilize the aesthetic as a tactic, producing physiognomies that render readable, which is to say that unmask, some of the various heretofore inscrutable “faces” of dataveillance. For our current historical moment there are few things more urgent and important than just this sort of digital aesthesis which, by the rendering readable of the realm of data, is the condition of possibility of a much needed dataveillant literacy.

#### Notes

- 1 Cited in Thomas Y. Levin, et. Al. Ed. *CTRL [Space] Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* (MIT Press, 2002), : p.606
- 2 See his *Limit Telephotography*, 2007 and *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon’s Secret World* (New York: Penguin., 2009): citation p.5

A large, stylized number '25' is rendered in a light gray, semi-transparent font. The '2' is on the left and the '5' is on the right. The background is a dark gray with a fine, repeating pattern of small, light-colored dots.

An Anthology for the 25th Anniversary of BIL-10a (ergarabirine)

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