

“The State of Surveillance Today”¹

It was eight years ago that the Surveillance Camera Players (SCP) quietly disbanded. Over the course of their 10-year-long existence, those New York-based anarcho-situationists managed to achieve their goal: to put the issue of the video surveillance of our streets and our lives squarely in front of the people – not in the form of petitions, candidates or press conferences, but directly, in the form of street theater, widely distributed, handmade maps of camera locations and walking tours that were always free and open to the public. The SCP also inspired the formation of similar groups in a half-dozen countries in Europe, organized two international days against video surveillance (one in 2001, the other in 2002), and, in 2006, published a book that documented every aspect of their campaign. After all that, it was time to move on.

Since then, the Surveillance State has continued to grow. Here in New York, several waves of new systems have been installed, with each one bringing more powerful (and expensive) cameras to our streets, subway stations and public housing units. As in Chicago and Washington, D.C., there is now a centralized, real-time, computerized surveillance meta-system at work. Its name is “Domain Surveillance” and it was developed in 2012 by the NYPD/CIA in conjunction with Microsoft.

With the SCP gone, has anyone else stepped up to continue the fight against publicly installed surveillance cameras? If so, how are they doing it?

Note that we are excluding from consideration the dozens and dozens of performance artists and installation-creators who use video surveillance systems in their works, but who almost always choose to position themselves and/or their viewers in the role of the Detective (the one who watches) and never take the position of the Fleeing Criminal (the one who is watched). For that is the basic distinction made by the Surveillance State: between those who are in authority and those who are presumed guilty until proven innocent and thus tracked relentlessly. Any identification with the Detective, even if it is done “ironically” or in the name of keeping the other Detectives honest, recognizes the legitimacy of the police’s authority and thus their power. No: real “surveillance art” doesn’t seek to make people “aware” or “ask questions,” but instead seeks to condemn and roll back these unwanted intrusions into our privacy, these violations of our right to be left alone, these technological supports for a “democratic” fascist State clearly in the making and partly in operation.

Need an example of bad surveillance art? Between June 11 and June 14, the New York Live Arts Theater on West 19th Street will be hosting the Zvi Dance

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Company's performance of "SURVEILLANCE." What is the purpose of this multi-media spectacle? To examine "how and why as a society we consent to this technology in our private lives." But, of course, "we" have done no such thing: "this technology" has been rammed down our throats, and we've been told it is for our own good, when it plainly is not.

The following groups and projects are more in tune with the reality of what's been going on. This isn't an exhaustive list; simply a sampler of approaches and options.

In 2009, Nuno Rocha, a young Portuguese filmmaker, made a wonderful six-minute-long film titled *3 x 3*. Without any dialogue, it depicts the interactions between a thin and awkward menial worker who is tasked with sweeping the floor of a basketball court and a fat and self-confident security guard who watches him via a sophisticated video-surveillance system. The beauty of this film is that, at the end, the worker motivates the guard (we won't say how) to abandon his post and join the worker on the court for a game of one-on-one. Nice idea: there is no need to destroy the watcher's booth if there's no one is inside it.

Also in 2009, Adam Harvey, a Brooklyn-based artist, started to design, produce, exhibit and sell "Stealth Wear," which, in the words of his Privacy Gift Shop (I kid you not), is "a collection of garments that shields [the wearer] against thermal imaging, a surveillance technology used widely by military drones to target people." The prices of these items are ludicrous or at least way beyond the means of the average person. The cheapest one, a simple cotton T-shirt with the image of "a predator drone" (made out of "thermally reflective" "silver-plated fabric") applied to it, costs \$40, while the most expensive one, an "Anti-Drone Burqa," costs \$2,500. There's also an "Anti-Drone Hijab" that costs \$550 and an "Anti-Drone Hoodie" that costs \$350. It isn't just the sky-high prices that are offensive: it is their paring with people whom the entire Western world considers to be second-class citizens, if not sub-humans: Muslim women and young black men (Trayvon Martin, for example).

Harvey has also designed a series of hairstyles and makeup designs that he calls "CV Dazzle" (these "style tips" are designed to "dazzle" and thus confuse the "Computer Vision" of video surveillance systems that are equipped with face-recognition software). The problem here isn't so much the pretentiousness and ugliness of the proposed styles and designs (authentic punk beats haute couture punk every fucking time), but Harvey's naïve belief that "once computer vision programs detect a face, they can extract data about your emotions, age and identity." Here he isn't relating facts, but the corporate propaganda distributed by the makers of those computer programs, which are in fact notorious for their inability to function as advertised.

Compare this, um, *ironic hipster bullshit* with the recent work (circa 2014) of the Chicago-based artist Leonardo Selvaggio. Like Harvey, Selvaggio (“savage” in Italian) produces items that their purchasers can use to protect and defend themselves against surveillance cameras. But unlike Harvey, who advises his clients to “avoid wearing masks as they are illegal in some cities,” Selvaggio makes masks (both prosthetic ones and paper cutouts). In an odd twist, these masks bear very good reproductions of his own face upon them. He sells them at cost.

Much in the style of the old SCP group are the Surveillance Camera Dancers, a project created in April-May 2011 by the Menifee Lab Theater, which is affiliated with Mt. San Jacinto College in Alameda, California. As their name indicates, these performers dance in front of the cameras. Their performance “Never Alone” included both choreographed dance moves and placards with blunt phrases such as “Who is watching Big Brother?” written on them.

Earlier this year, there was a protest in San Francisco against Google, which systematically photographs and displays images of virtually every single public place on the planet, collects and stores huge amounts of data about the people who use its services, and shares all of this data with the U.S. government and its intelligence-gathering agencies. At this protest, which briefly prevented the departure of the special buses that take Google employees to work, one of the protesters dressed up as a surveillance camera on stilts. A big improvement over the harmless performances in front of Google’s “Street View” car that were organized by the artists Robin Hewlett and Ben Kinsley in May, 2008! The point being made by the person on stilts was clear: surveillance cameras are both an integral part and the most visible manifestation of a rapidly emerging, data-obsessed, fascist State.

But does it make sense – is it effective – to fight against fascism with cultural tools such as films, articles of clothing, and street theater? The Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei doesn’t think so, though the device he claims to have invented (a can of spray-paint attached to the top of a long pole and triggered by a pull on a string) was actually invented and actually used many years ago upon billboards by Earth First! Some people in Berlin, Germany, don’t think so, either; that’s why they organized last year’s “Camover Competition.” The rules were simple: assemble an affinity group; adopt a name for it that begins with a revolutionary and ends with either Command, Brigade or Cell (example: the Guy Debord Brigade); videotape your group destroying as many publicly installed surveillance cameras as possible; and then upload that videotape to the Internet. The competition was a tremendous success. Not only did several groups in Europe and the United States contribute videotapes, but the very idea of the competition caused a scandal in the press, as well.