Digital Age: Surveillance Culture under Artistic Intervention

Yongxin Li

School of Social & Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK
Email: hedy08162023@163.com

Abstract

In the digital age, individuals engage in the collection, dissemination, and exposure of information across online platforms. The pervasive nature of digital media has made accessing information more convenient, albeit at the cost of personal privacy. Users often grant various permissions when accessing websites, inadvertently making themselves subjects of surveillance in the process. However, the opacity surrounding the pathways and purposes of personal information propagation has intensified apprehensions about surveillance. In the realm of art, artistic interventions serve as a powerful means of expressing dissent against surveillance culture. These interventions raise awareness about the need to safeguard privacy, prompting individuals to become active participants in the social discourse surrounding surveillance culture. Nevertheless, the "counter-gaze" that emerges through artistic interventions may lead to a reversal of roles, where the "watchers" become the "watched", contingent on varying layers of rights. In the digital age, the boundaries of surveillance are becoming increasingly blurred.

Keywords

Digital Age, Surveillance Culture, Artistic Interventions, Privacy

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the digital age has brought convenience to people's lives, and the open access to information in the Internet age has created the open values of information freedom, instant search and the "Right to know". In the digital realm, the Internet orchestrates the interplay of various modules such as data collection, storage, data generation, and analysis. Individuals within the network transform into sets of data points, with personal behaviors being manifested in digital form. The externalization of personal information may be in-

creasingly evolving towards the perspective of electronic surveillance (Dholakia & Zwick, 2005). Digital life blurs the line between private and public life, leaving no way to know where information will be used and by whom. After the 2019 Covid-19 pandemic, government agencies built massive surveillance networks, collecting vast amounts of people's private information in the name of health and further tightening controls on people (Tisné, 2020). The era of anonymity seems to have ended with the Internet, with the extended culture of surveillance based on cybersecurity repeatedly mentioned as a public agenda and the protection of privacy increasingly valued. The term "Surveillance culture" dates back to 1998 when William Staples used it in the book title. Surveillance culture has become a product of digital modernity based on political and economic rights and social media. Meanwhile, surveillance culture develops with the development of regional culture and other factors. The penetration of digital media makes the subject become the target or object of surveillance (Lyon, 2017). In the field of art, artistic intervention is constantly involved in monitoring discussions and reflections on themes through various works of art. Artistic interventions strengthen links with society, raising public awareness and increasing collective responsibility (Monahan, 2017). The fear of being watched may stem from the unknown anxiety of the invisible observer behind the screen. According to Sheren (2018), digital users are seamlessly connected and free to explore different platforms, all based on the need for users to accept location tracking and access information licenses from various software applications. In this process, a variety of user information is used for extensive data monitoring, which seems to have become commonplace in daily life.

However, people should be wary of the side effects of surveillance. Firstly, the desensitization to surveillance contributes to its gradual normalization, with closed-circuit television cameras assuming a symbolic role of "policing" as safety emblems. However, stringent regulation of visual information renders everyone a potential subject of surveillance (Wood & Webster, 2009). Secondly, there is the issue of potential data misuse in an era of convenient information exchange. According to Andrew and Baker (2021), even with the implementation of "informed consent" clauses, users have minimal control over how platforms utilize their data, leading to a paradoxical situation between data misuse and informed consent. Thirdly, there is the continuously blurred boundary of privacy. The risks of privacy erosion are escalating, with personal information becoming ubiquitous in the era of big data. Names, emails, numbers, and IP addresses are exposed in public policies, diminishing individuals' control over their privacy (Andrew & Baker, 2021).

2. Surveillance Zones under the Gaze of Predatory Observation

In recent years, artist Jakub Geltner from the Czech Republic has created a series of installations on the subject of surveillance. "Bird's Nest" series of art installa-

tions mainly focus on surveillance camera sculptures. Unlike other large art installations, the artist is committed to integrating the "Bird's nest" into the urban landscape and surrounding buildings (Jungbauer, 2015). "Bird's Nest No. 5" (Figure 1) is a very prominent representative. The giant camera acts as the bird's head, and the camera's different angles of view simulate the birds' behavior as they roost. When people saw the sculptures from a distance, they thought it was a flock of seabirds perched on the beach, but when they got closer, they realized it was a set of cameras and they had entered the surveillance zone.

In daily life, people may already be numb to exposure to various public cameras, and artistic interventions are quick to grab a nerve. The "Bird's Nest" works break the distance between the audience and the art installation, allowing the audience to participate without psychological defense, expressing the author's strong complaint against the surveillance culture. The beauty of the "Bird's Nest" works is that its art installation is not sharp in its expression; it is cleverly integrated into the environment but can leave a deep impression on the audience in the participation process. In his other works, "Bird's Nest No. 6" (Figure 2), the camera sculptures are arranged in an orderly manner to form an overhead angle, like some unknown mechanical behemoth, giving the audience a sense of fear of the unknown. The combination of the sculpture arrangement gives the works a certain sense of life, and it is like a bird's-eye view of the people passing by from below.

Meanwhile, the camera in "Bird's Nest No. 6" (Figure 2) is connected to the internet to record the reactions of people passing through the art installation. This setup uses social media as an extension of the project's art installation, penetrating the social fabric from the ordinary intention to monitor individuals. This process mirrors the use of digital marketing as a form of surveillance in today's social media markets to more accurately predict consumer psychology, undermining individual autonomy and privacy and becoming cannon fodder for data monitoring (Ruckenstein & Granroth, 2019). According to Monahan (2017), the artistic form of "Bird's Nest No. 6" (Figure 2) is a predatory gaze upon the human observer. The art installation silently looks down at the human being, and the massive contrast of angles and figures makes the human being look extremely small. People unable to change the art installation for their monitoring in the process of passive exposure of their role in the participation of the art installation broke the boundaries of space-time. "Bird's Nest" is an art installation that forms a complex relationship between multiple Spaces. In the first relation, the art installation directly monitors the viewer. In a second relation, the audience behind the Internet connection to the art installation is "Re-watching" passers-by. In the series "Bird's Nest", the author deeply understands and analyzes the topic of revealing surveillance. He incorporates the complex relationship between man, nature and machine into his artwork to form an artistic intervention, categorizing the nature of surveillance as a potentially Predatory Act (Monahan, 2017). Moreover, the name "Bird's Nest" cleverly echoes people's belief in the safety of the nest. When their home turf—the nest—is threatened by

surveillance, an uneasy emotional response quickly takes hold in the brain, leading to resistance and questioning of the surveillance culture.

Figure 1. Jakub Geltner, Nest 05, Urban space installation, Sculpture by the sea Aarhus, Denmark, 2015. Available at: http://www.sculpturebythesea.com/.

Figure 2. Jakub Geltner, Nest 06, Urban space installation, Sculpture by the sea Bondi, Sydney—Australia, 2015. Available at: http://www.sculpturebythesea.com/.

3. Counter-Surveillance Measures under Public Cameras

If the "Nest" series of works can be described as striking an alarm bell through visual effects, Steve Mann's "Shooting Back" is an active response to public surveillance through practical actions. In his project, Mann employs two sets of devices: one is a concealed camera for covert filming from hidden locations, and the other is a handheld camera serving as an "intervention prop" in the course of

the project (Monahan, 2006). According to his publicly available recordings, Mann inquires about the purpose of surveillance cameras with store employees, often receiving responses such as "for security," "not very clear," or "no need to worry." After concluding the conversation, Mann takes out a pre-prepared camera and directs it towards their faces. However, nearly everyone's initial reaction to seeing the camera is to evade and display signs of nervousness. The revealed contrast in people's behavior before and after encountering the camera exposes the contradictory relationship between individuals and surveillance. On one hand, people seem to have become accustomed to being under the gaze of cameras in various places, perhaps because surveillance under the camera encompasses everyone in public spaces, thus mitigating the discomfort of being monitored. According to Lyon (2017), ubiquitous public cameras confer a kind of implicit authorization, and individuals appear to comply with surveillance measures in the digital realm. On the other hand, when the camera no longer broadly records a space but focuses on a specific person, the individual immediately senses the feeling of being "watched" and adopts a defensive stance. In "Shooting Back," Mann places the surveillant in the position of the surveilled. When personal interests are at stake, the camera, serving as an intervention tool, takes on the role of a mirror, reflecting the blindly obedient behavior of store employees and disrupting the previous numbness (Monahan, 2006). However, one can speculate that the primary reason for installing cameras in the mall is likely for theft prevention. Such measures, while ensuring a certain level of security, may require sacrificing the personal privacy of ordinary individuals. The contradiction arises when people express anger, and the response often is, "If you're not doing anything wrong, you have nothing to worry about." When the camera focuses on individuals, the experiences of surveillance and being surveilled are concretized, and concerns about the purpose of surveillance footage emerge. In a sense, store employees become representatives of an authoritarian surveillance system, and the public becomes complicit in surveillance culture (Monahan, 2006).

Similarly, to make people aware of the drawbacks of surveillance culture, the art project "SIDEWALK ARRESTS" creates a unique space. Morrison sets up groups of cameras on a sidewalk and sits in the middle wearing elaborate clothing while reading book contents (Morrison, 2011). The author, pedestrians, and cameras form a closed-loop surveillance relationship. This spatial arrangement attracts hurried pedestrians, carving out a sensitive zone in the everyday street, making the audience keenly aware that the presence of cameras is not just for show. People, while observing the author, also notice the surveillance space enveloped by the cameras. In this art project, citizens are metaphorically arrested, shifting attention from the routine disregard of surveillance cameras to a heightened awareness of the existence of digital devices, further exploring the intersectional issues between digital technology and surveillance culture (Morrison, 2011).

The development of surveillance culture is intricately linked to the continuous advancement of digital technology, with the constant evolution of surveillance cameras and the proliferation of technologies such as facial recognition and the burgeoning field of artificial intelligence. In the late 1990s, modern data surveillance marked the initiation of data collection practices, giving rise to a new form of "surveillance capital" (Andrew & Baker, 2021). Moreover, in some instances of public crises, government policies, driven by security considerations, may lean towards the surveillance domain. The application of past military surveillance concepts to urban security has led to the establishment of novel surveillance patterns (Wood & Webster, 2009). Under the influence of such thinking, societal acceptance of surveillance and public awareness of surveillance culture are undergoing constant transformations. Some individuals categorize the ethical issues surrounding surveillance as matters concerning the apparatus of the state, while others posit that state monitoring poses no threat to law-abiding citizens, and the ongoing balance between public safety and individual privacy continues to influence the development of surveillance culture (Andrew & Baker, 2021).

The thriving development of artistic interventions in the realm of surveillance has heightened awareness and vigilance regarding privacy issues. However, as artworks resulting from artistic interventions increasingly intertwine with the human element, the inclusion of the "individual" in the creation of artistic works without prior consent may inadvertently give rise to another form of surveillance, potentially infringing on people's privacy.

4. Decentralizing Surveillance Powers: A Collective Conspiracy of Surveillance Culture

"Jaywalking" (Figure 3) installation by Belgian artist Dries Depoorte delves into the ethics of surveillance by combining public data from cities (Monahan, 2017). "Jaywalking" (Figure 3) has placed surveillance cameras in cities in different countries. When pedestrians jaywalk without obeying traffic rules, the system automatically captures this image and transmits it to a museum in another space. The participatory art installation will ask visitors to the museum, "Would you be willing to send this person to the local police station for jaywalking?"

The artist handed the monitor directly to a stranger. When the viewer presses the confirm button, the system sends a video of the pedestrian breaking the rules to the nearest police station, where the pedestrian is filmed and watched without his or her knowledge. It places the viewer in a position of responsibility for the interactive results of this art installation (Monahan, 2017). In jaywalking, the right to report could determine whether a person is punished, giving the viewer enormous power and reinforcing a privileged position in the observation hierarchy (Wang, 2021). However, the monitoring of pedestrians may constitute an orgy of collective complicity in the surveillance culture. Visitors who have the power to decide whether to report may not be aware that they are spying, and the level of knowledge can play a key role in privacy issues. This also may affects
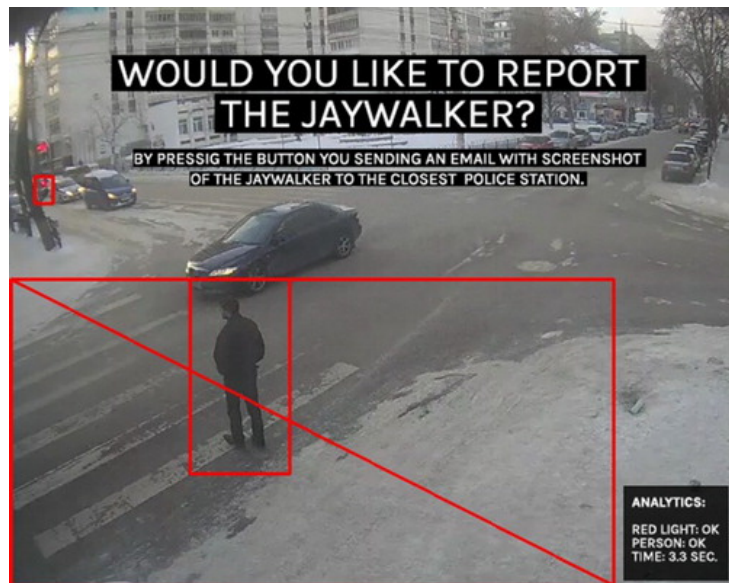
Figure 3. Dries Depoorter, Jaywalking, 2015, installation. Available at: https://www.wired.com/2016/03/turning-live-surveillance-feeds-unsettling-works-art/.

the varying levels of understanding of monitoring behavior on the web by different users (Sardá et al., 2019). The purpose of artistic intervention is to attack the harmful effects of the surveillance culture, and the form of expression of this art installation consists of spying on others and invading their privacy, "Jaywalking" (Figure 3) constitutes a multiplicity of complex moral ethics. The first is on-site spatial surveillance of unsuspecting pedestrians. Unknowingly, pedestrians become the victims and victims of surveillance. In the second space, visitors in the museum space are given the right to report. Their surveillance of pedestrians makes them passive monitors. In the third space, the pedestrian's observation and the tourists' reaction are finished from the artist's point of view. At a superficial technical level, the artist could use surveillance technology to accomplish three different levels of spatial surveillance. Do governmental entities employ concealed surveillance cameras clandestinely to establish an expansive four-dimensional surveillance framework? Are government agencies using such invisible surveillance cameras behind the scenes to create a larger four-dimensional surveillance? Furthermore, regardless of whether one's identity is being watched or being watched, it could be changed or reversed at any time on different levels of social rights.

5. Identity Reversal: The Interchange of Surveillance and the Surveilled

Artist Paolo Cirio has created an exhibition of 1000 photographs of the French police (Figure 4). The photos are based on public images taken during demonstrations in France that have raised questions about the misuse of facial recognition in public. The works created under the artistic intervention often present a huge visual impact and, to some extent, may have a particular offensive meaning.
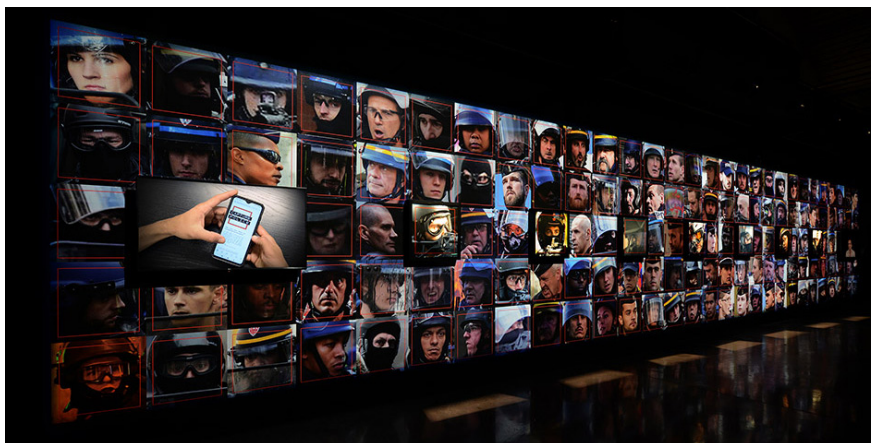
Figure 4. Paolo Cirio, Selected pictures of the Capture installation at Le Fresnoy, Tourcoing, France, 2020. Available at: https://paolocirio.net/work/capture/.

The exhibition is remarkable not only for the sheer number of 1,000 faces on display but also for the fact that the images on display are not artworks created out of thin air by artists or machine-generated human faces but by living individuals. However, when the carrier of the work of art is an actual individual, the artist's exposure to the police may also be in a predatory gaze. According to Wang (2021), when an artist creates for art's sake, the art of surveillance from the audience's standpoint may be endowed with a higher level of observation. The people in the photos are all ordinary people after the role of "Police" has been removed. Nevertheless, their photos have been placed in the exhibition to be scrutinized and monitored by different people, which may also violate their privacy and rights as ordinary people. The culture of violence may exacerbate counter-surveillance against the French police in the context of the joint attendance of art exhibitions. Therefore, while visiting the exhibition, people changed from the victim role of the monitored to the perpetrator's image of the surveillance of others. This artistic intervention may divide the population into government departments and the general population at the hierarchy level and presuppose a situation of confrontation. Both the "Jaywalking" (**Figure 3**) installation and the exhibition of 1000 photographs (**Figure 4**) address the issue of biometrics. Indeed, the tilt of the right of supervision has to some extent resisted the unjust supervision and artistic intervention, and achieved good results. However, it may also hurt some people's privacy.

Balancing individual privacy and surveillance in contemporary society appears to be entangled in a paradoxical dilemma. Privacy protection, while safeguarding individual privacy freedoms, concurrently imposes constraints on the depth of investigations into criminal activities (Hagen & Lysne, 2016). However, individuals can still take relevant measures to navigate the relationship between personal privacy and surveillance culture.

Firstly, ethical decision-making guidelines should be formulated in the context of surveillance. The application of surveillance technologies should operate within the framework of ethical considerations. For instance, Power et al. (2021)

proposed a process guide for ethical decision-making (SPED) in their research, quantifying the horizontal and vertical relationships between privacy rights and ethical levels to guide managerial decision-making processes. Secondly, within the premise of adhering to transparency principles, establishing legal frameworks to delimit the scope of surveillance activities is crucial. For example, the Swedish Camera Surveillance Act explicitly defines the rights regarding the use of digital surveillance, further refining regulations governing the storage management of digital surveillance technologies (Eneman et al., 2020). Moreover, during the data collection process, information about the purpose, protection measures, and remedies should be openly disclosed to maintain transparency in the surveillance process (Aquilina, 2010). Finally, privacy mechanisms for data protection should be enhanced. Computer developers should prioritize the security and privacy of data from the initial stages of development. Privacy-enhancing technologies are not side effects but rather innovative technologies that reduce invasions of personal privacy (Aquilina, 2010).

6. Conclusion

People break the space-time boundary through a digital connection in the fast-developing digital age. However, anti-surveillance is still an essential issue in today's era. Anti-surveillance not only combats power inequality through creative interventions but also strengthens people's thinking about the abuse of surveillance power in public places, creating a potentially more equitable environment (Macdonald, 2016). By using the method of artistic intervention, the artists seem to be manifesting the problem of surveillance, forming a new aesthetic landscape in the form of works of art, which leads viewers to reflect on themselves and their social relationships in a surveillance culture (Monahan, 2017). Indeed, it could be a challenge for artists to balance the moral dimension of artistic creation with maintaining the sensitivity of the work and fully expressing its content with regard to the privacy and safety of others. Digital technology is a double-edged sword, and a sense of the boundaries of surveillance may become increasingly difficult to manage in the face of security and privacy. In summary, artistic interventions function as a magnifying glass that focuses on surveillance culture. Through creative expression, whether through visual elements or participatory projects, they capture people's attention and foster positive interactive behaviors. Artistic interventions break the numbness associated with the normalization of surveillance culture. Employing at times provocative artistic techniques, they evoke emotional resonance, compelling individuals to question the power dynamics behind surveillance culture. The collision between surveillance culture and individual privacy in the digital age, as reflected through artistic interventions, unveils additional layers of societal issues.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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