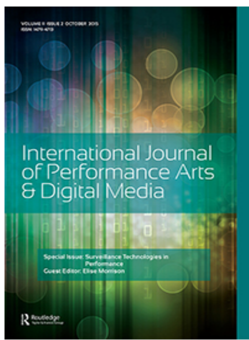

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EDITORIAL

Surveillance society needs performance theory and arts practice

This special issue on 'Surveillance Technologies in Performance' is motivated by a nexus of artistic inspiration, intellectual excitement and political urgency that has been building in intensity over the last two decades. Surveillance itself continues to be one of the most pressing ethical issues of our age, gaining attention in popular media, political debates and the now well-established academic field of surveillance studies. Indeed, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks that inaugurated life in the twenty-first century and the rapid technological advances in digital communication, commerce and artificial intelligence that have followed, we, as a global community, have seen surveillance technologies adopted into nearly every sphere of contemporary life – military, medical, communication, commerce, entertainment, national security and more. These widespread and diverse applications of surveillance technologies have brought with them attendant concerns over privacy; information security; remotely controlled warfare; privatized and covert partnerships between corporate and state entities; racial profiling; and discriminations in medical, financial, social, border control or workplace scenarios based on gender, sexuality, health, ethnicity or economic class (Lyon 2001; Singer 2003; Andrejevic 2004; Haggerty and Ericson 2006; Massumi 2007; Magnet 2011; Nakamura 2012; Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015); at the same time, they have introduced a host of benefits enjoyed by many – increased efficiency in online commerce, mobility and digital communications, the perception of greater national and civic security, and economic and technological growth.

Within this intensifying and ambivalent surveillance society, an especially significant application of surveillance technologies has come to prominence in recent years: as technologies of surveillance have become more prevalent within public space and more accessible to the consumer market, a growing number of artists and activists have appropriated CCTV cameras, GPS tracking systems, medical surveillance equipment, drones and a host of other commercially available surveillance technologies, turning them into representational tools that critically reflect upon and reimagine the social and political landscape of contemporary surveillance. Such groups as the Surveillance Camera Players (SCPs), the Institute for Applied Autonomy, Critical Art Ensemble, the Builders Association, Blast Theory, and the Electronic Disturbance Theater, and artists as Jill Magid, Steve Mann, Hasan Elahi, Wafaa Bilal, Janet Cardiff, Mona Hatoum, Zach Blas and Adam Harvey, many of whose works are discussed in this special issue, have staged surveillance technologies in performance to create an array of technologically savvy, politically conscious and esthetically

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innovative alternatives to the current structures of power and participation within surveillance society. As a result, 'surveillance art' has become a critical and invaluable genre of performance within surveillance society that necessitates formal attention. This issue of IJPADM thus aims to showcase some of the diverse and politically important work being produced by performance artists and scholars on the subject of surveillance technologies in performance, and to establish the genre of surveillance art and performance more centrally within performance studies and the field of digital media and performance.

Surveillance, performance and the blind field

Artists who stage surveillance technologies within frames of performance make a vital and unique contribution to contemporary discourses and experiences of surveillance. Surveillance art, as a genre of political activism and performance, combats the common tendency within surveillance society to succumb to a kind of amnesia of convenience, an ambivalent state in which the majority of user-consumers are willing to forget or look past the risks of using surveillance technologies in prescribed ways because of perceived economic, political and social gains. (For example, even after the revelations by former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden, few have substantively changed their patterns of behavior when it comes to digital communication and commerce.) As cultural theorist Henri Lefebvre ([1970] 2014) described it, this condition constitutes a 'blind field' – that which keeps social citizens from building critical, revolutionary discourses that would alleviate injustice, inequality and abuses of power in modern society. Lefebvre reasoned that blind fields come into being when societies lack effective 'bridges' – material and conceptual models that make evident the connections between the data of lived experience and the ideological discourses that shape them. Consumerist amnesia – or what James Harding calls in this issue the 'new amnesia' of dataveillance – and an ambivalent relationship to the risks and benefits of surveillance technologies are, for contemporary subjects, the preconditions for the blind field of surveillance society. Many citizens of the digital age consume the benefits of surveillance – more efficient online shopping, personalized advertising, convenient communication interfaces, constant connectivity through smart phones and other digital devices – and in consuming forget, or are distracted from the risks – massive data breaches, consolidations of personal information in the hands of corporate interests and, for many, prohibitively high interest rates, denial of medical benefits and impermeable national borders. Without material and conceptual models – Lefebvre's 'bridges' – the commercial, economic and security benefits of surveillance technologies threaten to blind or at least blur our ethical foresight and critical evaluations of contemporary surveillance society.

As I argue in my forthcoming book on this topic, *Discipline and Desire: Surveillance Technologies in Performance* (2016), artists who stage surveillance technologies within frames of performance provide such bridges. Staging works on street corners and online websites, in political protests and academic conferences, as well as in more traditional spaces of theatrical performance and installation art enables surveillance artists to present in distilled form pressing techno-cultural quandaries and ethical questions of the digital information age. In *Loving Big Brother: Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space*, an invaluable precedent to the work of the authors represented in this issue, McGrath (2004) argues that performances or installations that

(re)present scenes of surveillance importantly provoke audiences to experience rather than simply perceive or conceive of their relationships to these technologies. Drawing on his experiences as a theater director, McGrath observes that surveillance technologies onstage or in a gallery not only remind audiences of their appearance in everyday life, but also serve to 're-enliven that space with a sense of agency and choice' (McGrath 2004, 141–142). McGrath, who also draws on Lefebvre's theories of the production of space, argues that this sense of agency and choice is the value of 'performative space', wherein audience members can feel their 'own bodily and psychic relation to the distortions of normative space enacted by surveillance technologies' (141). Works by surveillance artists can thus make visible – and thus more available for scrutiny and revision – the risks posed by surveillance technologies in social and political spheres. Moreover, by placing surveillance technologies within theatrical frameworks, surveillance artists submit cultural assumptions about discipline, evidence and power within surveillance to the slippery, metonymic relationship between reality and fiction characteristic of theatrical representation (Feral 2002). In so doing, they not only critique existing, often hidden problems in surveillance society (such as systematized discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, nationality and economic status), but also rehearse new, alternative models of spectatorship, participation, subjecthood and agency within contemporary surveillance society.

Why surveillance needs performance theory and arts practice

My title for this introduction was inspired by the title of another editorial introduction for a special issue: *Surveillance & Society* (2009) 6 (4) on 'Gender and Surveillance'. The coeditors Kirstie Ball, Nicola Green, Hille Koskela and David J. Phillips argue: 'Surveillance Studies needs Gender and Sexuality', explaining, 'the political economies, methods, outcomes, and profound normalizing tendencies associated with surveillance are deeply amenable to critiques informed by theories of gender and sexuality' (352). I invoke this argument in part because the value of examining surveillance – and more specifically surveillance technologies in performance – from the perspective of feminist, gender and sexuality studies illuminates shared concerns and strategies of critique. The politics of visibility, desire, power and subjection are matters of concern to surveillance studies, feminist and gender studies, and performance studies alike. Moreover, performance-based strategies of critique within surveillance art share much with feminist performance strategies, particularly those in the Brechtian materialist tradition of feminist performance (Dolan 1988): many surveillance art works, even if they do not all draw explicit allegiances to feminism, are implicitly in conversation with feminist approaches to defining, critiquing and building alternatives to a patriarchal, disciplinary gaze in visual culture (Morrison 2016).

Several essays in this issue explore such concerns. In particular, the recent edited collection, feminist surveillance studies, reviewed in this volume by Steve Luber, brings attention to the concerns of feminism and gender studies within surveillance. As editors Rachel Dubrofsky and Shoshana Amielle Magnet write in their introduction to the book, digital surveillance techniques and technologies, which bring expectations of both privacy and perpetual visibility, exert particular pressures upon women and sexual, racial and ethnic minorities. Other essays in this issue explore the ways in which state, commercial and social surveillance systems function as technologies of race, gender and ethnicity, from Google's personalized advertising system

'AdWords' and Facebook's facial detection software 'DeepFace', to the neuro-surveillance of 'brainotypes' or 'Brain fingerprints'. What is more, these essays show that by incorporating surveillance technologies such as these into esthetic performances, artists can challenge and creatively reimagine the effects of surveillance on the lived experience of a diversity of communities and individuals. For example, Leo Selvaggio's 'URME Surveillance Prosthetic' provides digital and material likenesses of the artist's own face for others to take as their own, thereby fooling facial detection software into thinking they are him. Acknowledging that the face he has to offer is white and male, Selvaggio uses the project to highlight issues of racism and gender privilege that have been exacerbated by digital algorithms that use methods of determining and categorizing identity:

> The URME Surveillance Prosthetic, if undetected, allows for an individual to temporarily experience and consequently perform white male privilege in public space, while at the same time drawing attention to the very nature of privilege as a component of a patriarchal power structure that excludes the majority of Americans.

Just as 'surveillance studies needs gender and sexuality', the field of performance studies and the artistic practice of staging surveillance technologies have much to offer to scholarly and popular discourses on surveillance. From McGrath's *Loving Big Brother* and McKenzie's *Perform or Else* (2001) to Schechner's bold consideration of 9/11 as a work of avant-garde art (2009), theater and performance scholars have studied the performative and theatrical aspects of surveillance within contemporary culture. Indeed, 'performance' has long served as an instrumental term in surveillance theory and marketing – 'performance prediction', 'performance modeling', 'performance analytics' and 'total performance' are increasingly common descriptors in the analysis and marketing of surveillance technologies; in these instances, 'performance' functions as a euphemism for the efficacy of a surveillance system, for the behavior that a system might monitor or predict, or as James Harding argues in his essay in this issue, as a classification of risk management that serves to protect and increase the profit margins of private companies that take part in the growing surveillance industry: 'Ultimately, "total performance" means the opposite of eliminating threat. […] It means sustaining the need for and hence increasing the profits reaped by what activists like Jay Stanley of the American Civil Liberties Union have called the "surveillance industrial complex."' But Harding also suggests that attention to the performative dimensions of surveillance technologies reveals their ideological underpinnings: 'Find out how those technologies perform; find out what kind of information they deliver and how the information is sorted; and, you'll have a pretty good idea of whose interests they ultimately serve.' Lindsay Brandon Hunter's essay performs this kind of investigative research: Hunter sifts through the layers of the 'reality-fiction blur' characteristic of 'Alternate Reality Games' (ARGs), in which fictional aspects of a virtually enhanced game are interwoven with elements of real life. Her efforts expose the ethically ambivalent role of Nokia, the corporate sponsor of the 2010 Conspiracy for Good, an ARG that created an anti-capitalist, revolutionary narrative for its participants that dramatically inverted the communications company's ethically dubious role in a government surveillance scandal in Iran in 2009. As these authors show, the study of performance can help to reveal the intentions and ideologies

embedded within surveillance technologies and the socio-political narratives/actions to which they are put.

Performance as a material practice, too, serves as a vital means of critiquing and re-imagining the roles that surveillance technologies play in contemporary life, and of tracing substantive changes in structures and expectations of surveillance over time. In the early work of the SCPs, publicly installed CCTV cameras were transformed into interfaces of two-way communication rather than one-way discipline. Harding's essay discusses the practical and political development and eventual demise of the SCP, analyzing a number of their popular and lesser-known performance works within the context of technological and structural changes within surveillance society. As Emily Rosamond describes, Erica Scourti's 'Life in AdWords' (2012–2013) performatively tests the limits of Google's advertising algorithms to truly know her, as Scourti inputs her daily diary entries into Gmail in order to see herself reflected back in personalized Adwords. Rosamond's essay uses Scourti's performance, along with SWAMP's McService (2003) and Hasan Elahi's Tracking Transience (2005–ongoing) to develop a theory of surveillance as 'characterization'; Rosamond examines the intentions and attributes ascribed to each of these individuals under surveillance as a means of tracing 'an evolution of structures through which such attributions manifest' within surveillance throughout the years between two watershed moments: the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the Edward Snowden NSA revelations in 2013. Selvaggio, whose 'URME' project was described above, takes up related questions of characterization and the politics of identity in the context of cutting-edge developments in facial recognition technologies. Taking inspiration from artists Zach Blas, Adam Harvey and Stephanie Young who have used strategies of masking to thwart the efficacy of facial recognition technologies, Selvaggio reimagined the common practice of blurring out facial features of innocent passersby to protect their privacy, employed by Google Earth and law enforcement alike, as an opportunity to experiment with open-sourcing his own identity – his logic: 'rather than hide a face, substitute it'.

Surveillance art and performance can also expose audiences to their own habits of watching and being watched. Whereas Lindsay Brandon Hunter's essay suggests that the 'reality-fiction blur' and rabbit holes of ARGs such as Conspiracy for Good may immerse players to such a degree that they uncritically buy into the ideologically manipulative (and ethically dubious) messages of a game's corporate sponsor, immersive, interactive gaming environments are, in Clio Unger's analysis of Wafaa Bilal's Domestic Tension (2007), an opportunity for participants to think more critically about their tacit support of the remotely controlled drone strikes by US military in Iraq and other middle eastern countries. Unger argues that Bilal's use of gaming culture, particularly 'first person shooter' games, not only made visible ethnic and national tensions about Iraqi citizens within Western (and particularly American) culture, but also provided participants valuable opportunities to reflect upon anonymity and accountability within contemporary digital warfare and surveillance. As Ellen Pearlman explores in the final essay, artists such as Marina Abramović, Lisa Park and Yehuda Duyenas, who have begun to experiment with consumer grade electroencephalogram (EEG) brain readers or Brain Computer Interfaces that visualize and track neurological impulses, use artistic performance to introduce audiences to frontiers of surveillance. From Abramović's Magic of the Mutual Gaze (2011), in which the artist employed Emotiv headsets (commercially available EEG sensors) to visually

represent the cognitive synchronicity established between audience and performer, to cutting-edge neurological research into 'brainotypes' or 'brain fingerprints' that can identify individuals through their thought patterns, Pearlman offers a glimpse into the newest and potentially most invasive form of surveillance yet.

With a final word of thanks to the hard work of these authors, the anonymous reviewers who provided feedback along the way, and the production team at Routledge/Taylor & Francis, I leave the reader to enjoy the critical and entertaining work of these surveillance performance theorists and artists. There is no doubt in my mind that far more work of this kind is on the way.

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