

The Surveillance Economy: Toward a Geopolitics of Personalization

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Abstract:

Since the Snowden revelations of 2013, wider public knowledge of online surveillance practices has led to increasingly sceptical attitudes about the corporate world's surveillant analytics and Silicon Valley's innovations. But these developments must be seen as part of a geopolitical apparatus that works, in part, according to a cultural logic of personalization. Two works from *End User* at the Hayward Gallery (curated by Cliff Lauson, 27 November, 2014 – 8 February, 2015) – Jon Rafman's *The 9 Eyes of Google Street View* (2009-) and Liz Sterry's *Kay's Blog* (2011) – analyze the geopolitics of personalization, questioning whose bodies are made to bear the brunt of this economy's sundry spatial transpositions.

Full Text Article:

On 20 May 2013, Booz Allen Hamilton infrastructure analyst Edward Snowden, having taken a leave of absence from his work, quietly fled from Hawaii to Hong Kong. Shortly afterward, stories of the classified documents he leaked, which revealed the enormous extent of the National Security Agency's global surveillance program, rippled across the world. By tracking phone metadata and online activity, the NSA enacted the ambition to collect *all* personal communications: email content, telephone metadata, online searches and other information trails. In doing so, it conceptualized, and put into practice, a pervasive link between two vastly different geo-political sites. On the one hand, there was the citizen's mind: abstractly, yet minutely conceived as a node of viewpoints, data, and tendencies co-producing ever-shifting networks and moving through space. On the other hand, there was the data repository (notably, the Utah Data Center): a storage site for sleeper dossiers filled with personal information, which could be called upon at any time, in case an individual came to be "of interest" in the future.

Though these pervasive surveillance practices may be alarming, they are also, as yet, spectacularly ineffective as public security tools.¹ Perhaps this comes as no surprise. As both Grégoire Chamayou and Edward Snowden point out, the NSA's programs were never about public safety; they have always been about power. Specifically, Chamayou argues, the ambition to automatically construct sleeper dossiers on each person, such that personal information could be retroactively retrieved at any time,

¹ The NSA, in fact, contributed nothing whatsoever to public safety throughout its entire telephone metadata collection program. Grégoire Chamayou, "Oceanic Enemy: A Brief Philosophical History of the NSA," *Radical Philosophy* 191 (May/June 2015) p. 8.

constitutes a form of “*biographical power* founded on the generalized informational capture of the micro-histories of individual lives.”² This biographical power is also, we could say, a bio-spatial one. It inscribes silent, long-distance handshakes into the geopolitics of being – a new form of remote witnessing linking the daily lives of citizens, through fibre-optic cables, to data farms and desert sands.

As Benjamin Bratton reminds us,³ while the NSA scandal was significant, it pales in comparison to the massive corporate surveillance apparatus. With hindsight, the NSA might appear to be the least of the public’s worries in terms of surveillance – the “public option” in a sea of corporate data captures entailing not even the slightest hope of public oversight.

Predictive corporate surveillance practices can be traced back several decades; but in the age of big data, they have reached new levels of ubiquity and robustness. Karl Palmås traces the use of predictive analytics back to the post-World War II period, when former military staff took statistical analysis with them into the business sector. Yet in recent years, corporate sector analytics have become increasingly future-oriented. Today, a corporation’s success can be closely tied to its ability to predict, say, what customers will want to buy tomorrow (for instance, Kellogg’s Strawberry Pop Tarts™ right before a hurricane), or at what exact point of losses a particular gambler will leave the casino (using loyalty cards to track spending in real time, calculating and re-calibrating each gambler’s “pain point” and sending over “luck ambassadors” if their losses exceed this).⁴ Similarly, a host of online audience measurement companies invent and instantiate new, surveillant concepts of identity. For instance, the Quantcast corporation, one of many companies that provides audience measurement services for member websites, helps its customers best target advertisements to individual IP addresses by ascribing identities to users. Based on browsing history, one of Quantcast’s algorithms might decide that a user is, for instance, male. Maleness emerges as a trait, in Quantcast’s formulae, purely numerically, and purely in consumerist terms, without any reference to either the user’s body or her self-conception as a gendered subject.⁵

The field expands – the dossiers and storage sites multiply. Unlike the classic surveillance-images envisioned by George Orwell and Michel Foucault, today’s surveillance state is based on a fundamental permeability between state and corporation – and between the private and privatized spaces of homes, laptops, platforms and data storage facilities. What we have is not so much a surveillance state (in the Orwellian or Foucauldian sense) as a surveillance *economy* – what John Bellamy Foster and Robert McChesney would call surveillance capitalism⁶ – in which data mining and sophisticated computation vastly concentrate information, money and power, even as they disperse this power across enormous distances, and pass it back

² Ibid., p. 7.

³ Benjamin Bratton, “The Black Stack”. *e-flux journal* 53, 2014 [Online]. Available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-black-stack/> (Accessed: 27 May 2014).

⁴ Karl Palmås, “Predicting What You’ll Do Tomorrow: Panspectric Surveillance and the Contemporary Corporation,” *Surveillance and Society* 8 (3), 2011: 338-354.

⁵ John Cheney-Lippold, “A New Algorithmic Identity: Soft Biopolitics and the Modulation of Control.” *Theory, Culture and Society* 28(6), 2011: 164-181.

⁶ See John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney, “Surveillance Capitalism: Monopoly-Finance Capital, the Military-Industrial Complex, and the Digital Age,” *Monthly Review* 66(3) (2014): <http://monthlyreview.org/2014/07/01/surveillance-capitalism/> (Accessed 8 November, 2015).

and forth between government and corporate bodies. The surveillance economy – based, as it is, in part, on customer identification and hyper-personalization – enacts a geopolitics of personalization, spatially redistributing relations between online sharing and data mining, personal information and personal online perspectives in real time. In the process of all these shifts, of course, various species of spaces – bedrooms, IP addresses, sleeper dossiers, streets – are differently visible, and make bodies visible differently. Given these newly spatialized differences in visibility, some bodies come to bear more of the weights of scrutiny than others.

What are the implications of a geopolitics of personalization for art practices? Several artworks in the excellent exhibition *End User* at the Hayward Gallery, of which *Kay's Blog* was part (curated by Cliff Lauson, 27 November, 2014 – 8 February, 2015) can be understood as experiments with this question. (For the sake of space, I will only discuss two here.) In Liz Sterry's installation *Kay's Blog* (2011), an exact replica of a Canadian blogger's bedroom hovers in the middle of the project space at the Hayward Gallery in London. Through a window and a peephole, of sorts (surrounded by photos and further information about the blogger, Kay), visitors peer into a small, self-contained, messy bedroom, replete with mint-green walls, clashing green curtains, a mattress with a blue duvet on the floor, laundry baskets, a bra draped over an open dresser drawer, some beer cans, and a partly emptied bottle of Jack Daniels on top of the dresser by a small television. The blog becomes a blueprint, a key through which the artist remotely reconstructed every last detail of the Kay's room – a clashing, dishevelled icon of alienated, private space that acts at the edges of the blogger's online posts. The room, in this new milieu of image-exchange, becomes reframed, repurposed as a kind of storage space – thing-storage, person-storage, a sleeper dossier with an actual, implied sleeper.

Sterry's piece examines the collapse of what appear to have formerly been more robust distinctions between private and public space – even if, in modernity, these distinctions were already breaking down. (Of course, private, domestic spaces have, for centuries, housed commodities that have intimately tied them to international circuits of production and exchange.) Modern architecture, as Beatriz Colomina argued in 1994, already dramatically renegotiated the distinction between private and public space, bringing publicity into the private.⁷ When modern architectural spaces are retrofitted with wifi, laptops, bloggers, smartphones and fibre-optic cable, this erosion, and rearrangement, of differences between the private and the public extends and deepens. However, in an online surveillance economy, it isn't so much that private space becomes public – or, at least, this is not the *only* thing that happens, even if it is on the surface, so to speak, of Sterry's voyeuristic, staring gesture. Rather, the private, becoming public, is also newly *privatized* – turned into data-sets that will benefit a remote few corporate and governmental players whose servers are powerful enough to capitalize on personal information.

This shift plays out as a confusion between desire and its subjects. We are often told that self-expressive, self-exposing bloggers (and this critique is levelled particularly at young women) are narcissistic – that they deploy a naïve style of (classed) online being, which trades on a confusion between interpersonal connectivity and exhibitionism. Intervening in the geospatial politics of the blog and its concomitant

⁷ See Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

desires, Sterry's piece exposes such assumptions, but also upbraids them. *Kay's Blog* changes the viewpoint on the scene's spatial diagram of desire, erodes the difference between the blogger's desire to self-expose and the blog visitor's voyeurism (now transferred onto gallery goers, who peer in to the bedroom, completing the spectacle of privacy-becoming-public). In doing so, it seems to suggest the seeming automaticity of both of these positions within the state of surveillance capital, which both feeds on and supercedes both of these desires, rendering them moot and obsolete with respect to a cooler, quieter, structural desire of the capitalist surveillance economy to "know" its subjects.

If Sterry's piece examined geopolitical shifts in the most private of personal spaces – the single bedroom – seemingly at the other end of the spectrum is Jon Rafman's *The 9 Eyes of Google Street View* (2009-). Rafman explores both city streets and highways as sites of vastly shifting modes of publicity and display, scouring Google Street View for odd, interesting, uncanny or arresting images (partly through his own intense search-expeditions on Google Street View, and partly through searching other bloggers' findings).

A gorgeous roadside landscape, with sun streaming through pines. A flipped car on the side of the road, with a tow truck near at hand. A monkey perched on a stone wall, taking in a seaside view. A Japanese street parade. An escaped convict, perhaps, clad in orange, running down a country road. A tiger walking through a strip-mall parking lot. A man running up a flooded street. A costumed gang in the road, stopping all incoming traffic. A corpse surrounded by police cars, partially covered with a body bag. A slum, where two kids carry a television. A toiled-papered house. A roadside rainbow. A van on fire. A scene of domestic violence unfurling in a doorway: a man menacingly gripping a woman's head. Policemen arresting a group of boys, lined up with their arms on the wall. Prostitutes lining the road. This piece enacts the exploits of the bedroom explorer, who travels the world through images without ever leaving his desk. In doing so, it examines the street as a shifting geopolitical territory, subject to new regimes of visibility and invisibility, new modes of exposure, informatics and display.

Paris, from the 1850s to the 1870s, experienced a vast upheaval in its spatial mesh of visibilities. Georges-Eugène Haussmann remodelled vast swaths of the city, doing away with labyrinthine, overcrowded medieval neighbourhoods in favour of the wide boulevards that still characterize it today. As a result of these developments, people of different classes became more visible to each other. The *flâneur*, who passively took in all these new clashes of visibility, was born. Google Street View, Rafman's piece suggests, performs an analogous shift in the conditions of visibility – except that this time, in addition to the bedroom *flâneur*, of sorts (in this case, Rafman), there is also a silent, informatic witness.

The street becomes a stage for the bedroom explorer; yet collecting the street's images, for ostensibly "public," yet for-profit use by online users, is also a conceit for the Street View car, which trades in many forms of information as it passes through. (Its antennas also scan for local wifi networks, which help to calibrate its location

services.⁸) Some kinds of information the Street View car collects might be quite indifferent, in fact, to the human eye and its ways of seeing. By repurposing the Street View gaze, retrofitting it with photographic history, Rafman explores how the latter globalizes the Haussmannized gaze and places it at a remove, repeatedly bringing class difference and differential vulnerability (the Googler's safe, indoor haven; the prostitute's utter precarity) to the fore. Various forms of vulnerability meet at the edges of the streets: environmental catastrophe, prostitution, the mortal threat of the car accident or violent shooting. These meet with the occasional rainbow or breathtaking landscape. Ramping up the "personal" content of Google Street View by highlighting many complex unfolding human dramas, Rafman draws attention to a politics of personalization at Street View's edges – the ways in which its images can never divest themselves of a personal cost, applied to some bodies more than others, in becoming visible as they become data-mined.

As Ted Striphas argues, there are now two audiences for culture: people and machines.⁹ Rafman and Sterry's projects are geared, of course, to human eyes; yet they also reveal something of the eye's obsolescence in a surveillance economy, which rearranges visibility according to new, remote witnesses. Even with its most distanced, ubiquitous gaze, this new economy cannot also help but be a geopolitics of personalization, presenting, as it does, new models for image-vulnerability that crisscross spatial territories, and new forms of obsolescence for older economies of image-desire: voyeurism, exhibitionism, *flâneurism*.

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⁸ See Jemima Kiss, "Google Admits Collecting Wifi Data Through Street View Cars," *The Guardian*, 15 May 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/may/15/google-admits-storing-private-data> (Accessed 8 November, 2015).

⁹ Ted Striphas, "Algorithmic Culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18(4-5) (2015): 395-412.