

Counter-surveillance as Political Intervention?

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This paper analyzes practices of counter-surveillance—particularly against closed-circuit television systems in urban areas—and theorizes their political implications. Counter-surveillance is defined as intentional, tactical uses, or disruptions of surveillance technologies to challenge institutional power asymmetries. Such activities can include disabling or destroying surveillance cameras, mapping paths of least surveillance and disseminating that information over the Internet, employing video cameras to monitor sanctioned surveillance systems and their personnel, or staging public plays to draw attention to the prevalence of surveillance in society. The main argument is that current modes of activism tend to individualize surveillance problems and methods of resistance, leaving the institutions, policies, and cultural assumptions that support public surveillance relatively insulated from attack.

Keywords Surveillance; resistance; activism; art; social movements; social control; globalization

What happens when the cameras are turned back on those monitoring us? This paper analyzes such practices of counter-surveillance—particularly against video and closed-circuit television (CCTV) systems in urban areas—and theorizes their political implications. Counter-surveillance can include disabling or destroying surveillance cameras, mapping paths of least surveillance and disseminating that information over the Internet, employing video cameras to monitor sanctioned surveillance systems and their personnel, or staging public plays to draw attention to the prevalence of surveillance in society. In some cases, marginal groups selectively appropriate technologies that they might otherwise oppose when used by those with institutional power. On one hand, these examples illustrate the under-determination of technologies and suggest further avenues for political intervention through counter-surveillance. On the other hand, because surveillance systems evolve through social conflict, counter-surveillance practices may implicate opposition groups in the further development of global systems of control.

Counter-surveillance operates within and in reaction to ongoing global transformations of public spaces and resources. According to social theorists

(for example, Harvey 1990; Castells 1996), a crisis in capital accumulation in the mid-1970s precipitated a shift from mass-production to flexible production regimes, catalyzing organizational decentralization, labor outsourcing, computerized automation, just-in-time production, and, increasingly, the privatization of that which has historically been considered “public.” These structural transformations aggravated conditions of social inequality, leading to the development of new mechanisms of social control to regulate bodies in this unstable terrain. Some of the most effective forms of social control are those that naturalize the exclusion of economically or culturally marginalized groups through architecture or infrastructure. Mass incarceration of over two million individuals in the United States alone is one extreme measure of such post-industrial exclusion (Kupchik and Monahan 2006). Less dramatically, but perhaps more pervasively, fortified enclaves such as gated communities, shopping malls, and business centers have multiplied exponentially over the past decade and seem to be as prevalent in “developing” countries as in “developed” countries (Davis 1990; Caldeira 2000; Low 2003; Monahan 2006a). Additionally, privatized streets, parks, and security services effectively sacrifice civic accountability and civil rights while increasing affordances for the monitoring of public life (Zukin 1995). Finally, telecommunications and other infrastructures unevenly distribute access to the goods and services necessary for modern life while facilitating data collection on and control of the public (Reiman 1995; Graham and Marvin 2001; Monahan 2005). Against this backdrop, the embedding of technological surveillance into spaces and infrastructures serves not only to augment existing social control functions, but also capital accumulation imperatives, which are readily seen with the sharing of surveillance operations and data between public and private sectors (Gandy 2003; ACLU 2004; O’Harrow 2005; Monahan 2006c).

Through a range of tactical interventions into the logic and institutions of global capitalism, counter-surveillance tacticians seek to disrupt these trends in the privatization, sanitation, and elimination of that which is “public.” While the ideologies and intentions of those engaging in counter-surveillance are manifold and disparate, they are unified in the mission of safeguarding—or creating—the necessary spaces for meaningful participation in determining the social, environmental, and economic conditions of life. Because of this orientation, the term *counter-surveillance* will be used here to indicate intentional, tactical uses, or disruptions of surveillance technologies to challenge institutional power asymmetries.

This article reviews several counter-surveillance practices and analyzes the power relations simultaneously revealed and produced by resistance to institutionalized surveillance. Importantly, the emphasis here is upon the *framing* of surveillance problems and responses by activists, or on points of *symbolic* conflict rather than *physical* confrontation. Thus, it is assumed that while counter-surveillance practitioners may have immediate practical goals, such as circumventing or destroying video cameras, that they are foremost engaged in acts of symbolic resistance with the intention of raising public awareness about

modern surveillance regimes.¹ The body of this paper will analyze two types of counter-surveillance efforts (interventions into the technical and the social faces of public surveillance) and then theorize the efficacy and implications of counter-surveillance more generally. The data are drawn primarily from websites, video productions, and publications, but several interviews were conducted with activists in the United States to corroborate the critical readings offered here. The main argument is that activists tend to individualize both surveillance problems and methods of resistance, leaving the institutions, policies, and cultural assumptions that support public surveillance relatively insulated from attack. Furthermore, while the oppositional framing presented by activists (i.e. counter-surveillance versus surveillance) may challenge the *status quo* and raise public awareness, it also introduces the danger of unintentionally reinforcing the systems of social control that activists seek to undermine.

Technical Interventions

Surveillance circumvention and destruction are two activist interventions that concentrate on the technical side of modern surveillance. Of course the technical and the social dimensions of all technologies are thoroughly intertwined, as science and technology studies scholars have well demonstrated (for example, Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch 1987; Bijker and Law 1992), so the point in separating them out here is to draw attention to the specific sites of intervention as defined by counter-surveillance tacticians.

Institute for Applied Autonomy

The first example is offered by the Institute for Applied Autonomy (IAA), which is a collective of technicians/artists/activists engaged in projects of productive disruption and collective empowerment (Schienke and IAA 2002). According to their website:

[The IAA] was founded in 1998 as a technological research and development organization concerned with individual and collective self-determination. Our mission is to study the forces and structures which effect self-determination; to create cultural artifacts which address these forces; and to develop technologies which serve social and human needs. (IAA 2003)

Some of these projects include automated graffiti-writing robots, a propaganda distributing robot called “Little Brother,” and a web-based application called “iSee” that allows users to map paths of least surveillance in urban areas.

1. See Marx (2003) for a typology of acts of resistance to dominant uses of surveillance (or “tacks in the shoe”), which exploit the ironic vulnerabilities of ubiquitous surveillance projects.

The surveillance-mapping iSee application offers a provocative entry point into counter-surveillance territory (see Figures 1 and 2).² The opening flash display on the website depicts a blue robot-like icon of a person who has a cannonball bomb with a lit fuse for a head (Figure 1). Next, the lens of the viewing area pulls back, revealing that the person is squarely placed underneath a large microscope with a red video surveillance camera as its lens. The red cameras then multiply, triangulating on the person who begins a passage, represented by yellow dash marks, along city streets. The graphic rotates and pulls back one last time to reveal that the name of the application (“iSee”) has been traced by the route taken by the robot-like figure. In the upper left corner, in a mock allusion to numbering conventions for software development, the website overtly references the tense political climate of surveillance in places like New York City: “iSEE v.911: ‘Now more than ever.’”

Once past the opening scene, the application presents the user with a street map of Manhattan with a dramatic black background and abundant red boxes

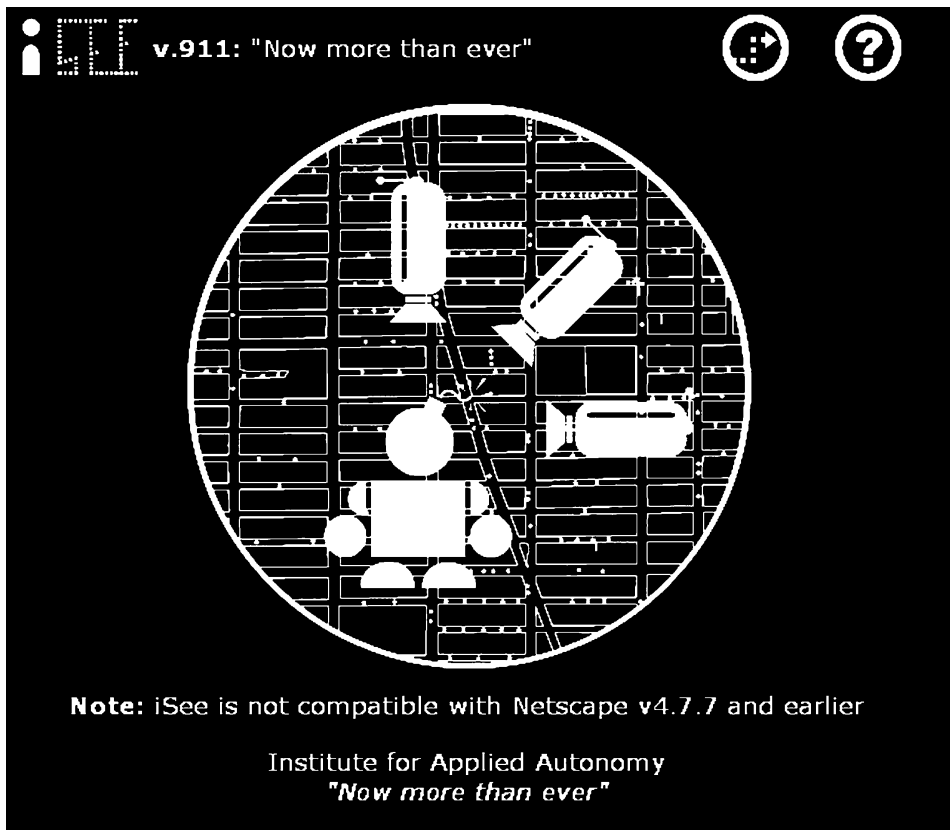


Figure 1 iSee application introduction.

2. www.appliedautonomy.com/isee.html



Figure 2 iSee application.

indicating areas under video surveillance (Figure 2). The map is engaged by clicking first on a starting point and second on a destination point. After a few seconds of calculation, a yellow route is indicated for a person to travel the path of least surveillance to his or her destination. As with other online mapping programs, the user can zoom in or out, scroll up, down, or sideways, or “reset” to begin the mapping process anew. Finally, the bottom right corner displays the travel distance and the number of cameras to which one will be exposed along the route specified.

This website offers rich symbolic referents that extend well beyond the utility of a route-generating application. The figure of a person as robot communicates both the dehumanizing threat of individual conformity (or self-regulation) in the face of ubiquitous surveillance and the construction of individuals as social machinery, data points, or risk potentialities from the point of view of those doing the monitoring. That this iconographic robot-person has a cannonball bomb with a lit fuse for a head represents the explosive volatility of the situation: viewing people as threats to be monitored and controlled, rather than as citizens with civil rights, may destroy civil society and/or may lead to violent opposition. Finally, the placement of this solitary figure underneath its own scrutinizing microscope(s) stresses the atomization of individuals as suspect bodies strangely decontextualized and divorced from political, social, or economic realities. The tacit critique here is that, once atomized as such, surveillance regimes view individuals from a universalistic perspective and are therefore unable to perceive particularistic conditions, such as racism or economic inequality, which inscribe all social relations. If such particulars fall outside the sterilizing camera frame,

then they cease to exist as mitigating circumstances or—perhaps more importantly—as social problems worthy of attention and correction.

Such iSee applications are now available for the cities of New York in the USA, Amsterdam in The Netherlands, and Ljubljana in Slovenia. The aim of these websites is neither to directly interfere with the surveillance apparatus in these cities, nor is it to allow individuals to effectively circumvent monitoring, although that is the immediate and practical outcome. Instead, the goal is to raise public awareness and foster public debate over the prevalence of surveillance cameras and their effects on public life. Because technological infrastructures become invisible when they are functional (Bowker and Star 1999), and the political effects of technologies, more generally, are off the radar screen of most people (Winner 1986), the intervention of iSee renders visible the larger pattern of surveillance proliferation and calls into question its purpose, agenda, and effects. The iSee intervention jolts viewers and users into awareness; it invites inquiry into surveillance devices distributed throughout our lives; it opens up a space for discussion about what kinds of surveillance are acceptable and what kinds are not.

®TMark

If the Institute for Applied Autonomy's iSee application offers an intervention for circumventing video surveillance in public spaces, the group ®TMark advocates a more radical and direct approach: destroying the cameras. ®TMark is well known in activist and culture-jamming circles for their high-profile projects. One of their more famous ventures was "The Barbie Liberation Organization," which swapped voice boxes between Barbie and GI Joe dolls so that Barbie would say things like "Vengeance is Mine!" and GI Joe would declare things like "Math is hard!" (Dery 1994; Greenberg 1994; RTMark 2000). More recently, ®TMark's "The Yes Men" gained international attention by pretending to be spokespersons for Dow Chemical (which is now the parent company of Union Carbide) and promising on BBC World Television to provide reparations for gas victims in Bhopal, India (Democracy Now! 2004; DowEthics 2004; The Yes Men 2004). ®TMark's guide to surveillance camera destruction is an engaging and deliberately messy website (*vis-à-vis* their other pages) that celebrates low-tech, decentralized, populist, and "fun" approaches to these activities (RTMark 2000).³

The "Guide to Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) destruction" is a nut-and-bolts document that supports this humble orientation through its stark design and formulaic style. After the document's title, a provocative black-and-white picture of a CCTV tower, and other prolegomenon (e.g. contact email for suggestions), the page presents an itemized and hyperlinked table of contents for quick reference. The main sections include "WHY DESTROY CCTV CAMERAS," "TYPES OF CCTV CAMERA," "METHODS OF ATTACK," and "TRAINING." Each

3. www.rtmk.com/cctv/

section remains structurally true to the “guide” genre by parsimoniously explaining exactly what one needs to do and what one needs to know, without much other information to distract from the counter-surveillance task(s) at hand.

The section on methods of attack is the most provocative. The methods described are placing around cameras plastic bags filled with glue, affixing stickers or tape over camera lenses, shooting cameras with children’s high-powered water gun toys filled with paint, temporarily disabling lenses with laser pointers, cutting CCTV cables with axes or garden tools, and dropping concrete blocks on cameras from rooftops. Rather than simply describing methods for disabling video surveillance cameras, however, the instructions reveal a pattern of values and an engaging subtext about camera destruction as an embodied social practice. Thus, methods that draw public attention to the surveillance systems or that reveal cameras as inoperable (such as shooting them with paint guns) are preferred to those that do not heighten public awareness (such as disabling cameras with a laser pointer). Along these lines, regarding the method of bagging cameras, the site says: “To Bag a camera theres a high chance that you can reach it with ease. If this is the case dont hesitate to smash the glass, lens and any other components. Dont bag it afterwards, people need to see the units smashed” (spelling errors and abbreviations are accurate to the website and serve to reinforce the low-tech aesthetic).

Other values communicated by the guide are those of fun, efficiency, and permanence. The paint gun method is celebrated as being “Fast, fun and easy,” and therefore “Highly recommended”—and, similarly, cutting camera cables emits “Satisfying sparks.” The paint gun method is also touted for its relative efficiency (“one hour action can easily take out 10 cameras”) compared with the laser pointer, which has questionable efficacy and is therefore not recommended. Finally, permanently destroying equipment is valued more highly than temporarily disabling it: cutting cables “Requires complete costly rewiring” and block drops on cameras will “totally” destroy them “in a shower of sparks.” With the paint gun method, by contrast, the camera is “easily cleaned,” so the intervention is “only effective for short time only.”

These counter-surveillance activities are intended to be social and to raise social awareness. A section on “working together” highlights the importance of trusting those you work with and getting to know their strengths and weaknesses. And clearly disabled cameras, much like the website itself, are intended to alert people to the prevalence of unregulated surveillance. (One might even say that camera destruction by activists is not a goal of the website at all; that it instead seeks to provoke the public to insist that controls be placed on surveillance proliferation.) The subtext of the site is one of overcoming both conformity and compliant adaptation to the surveillance society. This message can be read in passages on physical training (“Dont go to the gym—you need to be deconditioned not conditioned”) or on learning one’s territory (“Don’t use paths or streets [only cross them at right angles]”). In this document, embodied social practice and acts of reflexive subversion serve as responses to surveillance technologies that are seen as socially sterilizing.

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On the surface, the Institute for Applied Autonomy's iSee project and [®]TMark's guide to surveillance camera destruction may seem like radically different responses to public surveillance. iSee is a high-tech application facilitating circumvention of video surveillance through its generation of paths of least surveillance. The guide to camera destruction, on the other hand, encourages resistance against public surveillance through low-tech, neo-Luddite attacks. Both forms of counter-surveillance, however, focus their attention and critique on the *technologies of surveillance*, which act as material representations of large-scale monitoring regimes. Neither of them directly targets the public and private institutions that are mobilizing surveillance or the individuals within these institutions.⁴

The few glimpses these groups offer of their social or political adversaries reveal them as individual police officers or private security guards who are emboldened by the technologies. Both groups note the valence of video surveillance to amplify existing conditions of discrimination or abuse while obscuring the actors behind the scenes. The IAA's information page for iSee mobilizes social science research on surveillance, complete with academic citations, to thoroughly document trends toward increased abuse of marginalized groups with video surveillance, most notably of minorities, women, youth, outsiders (such as the homeless), and activists. Part of the reason that the technologies lend themselves to these uses, the site explains, is that policies for surveillance oversight, access, or retention are either purposely opaque or non-existent; this is especially true in the United States because so much public surveillance in that country is conducted by private companies, so the equipment and footage is privately owned. Of course, it should be pointed out that, regardless of regulation or oversight, the technologies themselves insulate the operators from immediate, if not all, scrutiny, thereby encouraging widespread voyeurism of women (Norris and Armstrong 1997; Koskela 2000; Rosen 2001) and profiling of racial and other minorities (Lyon 2001). The [®]TMark site echoes these sentiments with quotes from well-known surveillance studies scholars (i.e. Clive Norris, Gary Armstrong, and Jason Ditton), but otherwise answers the question of "Why destroy CCTV cameras" with the simple response of "Trust your instincts."

Because in the eyes of these groups surveillance technologies catalyze abuse by individuals, the answer is to draw attention to the cameras through provocative websites or, more overtly, to circumvent and/or destroy them. The interventions of these activist groups concentrate on the technical side of modern surveillance, and, while they are explicitly critical of social or

4. In contrast, [®]TMark's "The Yes Men" clearly do agitate for change on an institutional level (The Yes Men 2003). Their website explains this mission: "Identity theft: Small-time criminals impersonate honest people in order to steal their money. Targets are ordinary folks whose ID numbers fell into the wrong hands. Identity correction: Honest people impersonate big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them. Targets are leaders and big corporations who put profits ahead of everything else" (The Yes Men 2005).

institutional structures, the tendency is to individualize the problems by individualizing the abusive actors—who are identified either as police or security guards. Still, it must be noted that attention to police officers or other agents of surveillance is marginal in their presentations. As the next section will show, counter-surveillance can also be targeted at the institutional agents enmeshed within corporate or law-enforcement systems and/or located behind the cameras.

Social Interventions

While some counter-surveillance activities, such as those described above, direct criticism at the technologies themselves, other modes of intervention seek to engage with specific agents of surveillance (e.g. camera operators, police, security personnel, etc.). This section will investigate two of these social interventions: Steve Mann’s “Shooting Back” project, and performances by the Surveillance Camera Players. As with the IAA and [®]TMark, these interventions represent two ends of the spectrum from high-tech to low-tech (see Table 1), and, as I will argue, they have similar difficulty in moving critiques of surveillance beyond the level of the individual to their larger institutional and political origins (Mann 2004).

Shooting Back

Drawing explicitly upon military metaphors, Steve Mann’s Shooting Back project utilizes wearable, high-tech surveillance devices to take video footage “shots” of security personnel and other workers in privately owned stores and shops. Mann (or his collaborators) is equipped with two sets of recording technologies for this project: a covert wearable camera, either implanted in sunglasses or a baseball cap, and a handheld video recorder that is kept concealed in a bag until needed as a “prop.” For the intervention, Mann first walks into a store that has a fairly obvious surveillance system, with tinted glass domes in the ceiling, for example. He then asks clerks, managers, and/or guards what the glass domes are for and receives a variety of responses along the lines of “I don’t know” or “They’re light fixtures” or “They’re for security, but you don’t need to worry about them if you’re not doing anything wrong.” All of these interactions are

Table 1 Counter-surveillance interventions

Arena of intervention	Mode of intervention	
	High-tech	Low-tech
Technical Social	Institute for Applied Autonomy Shooting Back	[®] TMark Surveillance Camera Players

recorded with Mann's hidden, wearable camera. Next, Mann removes the handheld video recorder from his bag and points it in the faces of his interlocutors. As might be expected, they promptly shy away from the recorder, tell him that pictures or other recordings are disallowed in the store, and ask him to leave. Mann responds by parroting their earlier words about not needing to worry about recordings if one is not doing anything wrong and asking them why they are so uncomfortable. Then he leaves. The footage from these interactions is placed on websites for public viewing, and Mann has also created a documentary film from this material.⁵

This counter-surveillance intervention is explicitly conceived of as an art project that appropriates surveillance technologies to challenge their dominant meanings and uses. Mann mobilizes a tactic he calls "reflectionism," or reflecting experiences of being under surveillance back on the surveillers, with the goal of destabilizing store employees to make them realize that they are merely "totalitarianist officials" involved in acts of blind obedience and conformity (Mann 2002). Mann writes:

It is my hope that the department store attendant/representative sees himself/herself in the bureaucratic 'mirror' that I have created ... [and that this helps them] to realize or admit for a brief instant that they are puppets and to confront the reality of what their blind obedience leads to. (Mann 2002, 541)

Beyond this (somewhat dubious) educational goal, the Shooting Back project further aspires to explode the rhetoric behind systematic public surveillance in places of commerce. For example, the project raises the following question: if surveillance is intended for public safety, then would not more cameras increase the potential for such safety? The answer is an obvious "no," because the primary (intended) function of cameras in stores is theft prevention, and they are as often trained on employees as on customers (Staples 2000).

Shooting Back is a provocative project because it calls attention to the embodied experiences of watching and being watched, of recording and being recorded. Usual uses of video surveillance, in contradistinction, tend to erase all sense of embodied action and interaction through their ambiguity (e.g. you do not know who is watching or when), through their integration into infrastructure (e.g. they become the taken-for-granted backdrop to social life), and through their mediation of experience (e.g. camera operators may feel a disconnect from those they are watching, and vice versa). Shooting Back disrupts the illusion of detached, objective, impersonal, disembodied monitoring—a camera in one's face personalizes the experience of being recorded in a very direct and uncomfortable way. One can speculate that the project is especially destabilizing and annoying for employees, because for them store surveillance systems and monitoring practices are institutional projections that they are relatively powerless to alter.

5. wearcam.org/shootingback.html

Mann's rather unforgiving denouncement of individuals working in stores, however, reveals certain assumptions about the problems of modern surveillance. First, by criticizing employees as being "puppets" who blindly accept their companies' explanations for surveillance and comply with company policies, Mann implies that all individuals are rational actors with equal social and economic footing. Thus, if low-income employees elect not to fight the system like he does, then they must be either ignorant or weak-willed, or both. Second, by calling store clerks and security guards representatives of totalitarian surveillance regimes, Mann conflates individuals with the institutions of which they are a part, effectively sidestepping the important but more difficult problem of changing institutional relations, structures, or logics. Both these assumptions lead to the conclusion that one can contend with the problem of rampant surveillance by intervening on the level of the individual and by educating people about their complicity with the systems. Unfortunately, the fact that people have very real dependencies upon their jobs or that vast asymmetrical power differentials separate workers from the systems they work within (and perhaps from the activists as well) become unimportant issues once the critique of surveillance is abstracted and individualized in this way.

Surveillance Camera Players

The Surveillance Camera Players (SCP) are a New York-based, *ad-hoc* acting troupe that stages performances in front of surveillance cameras in public places (SCP 2005b).⁶ Founded in 1996 with a performance of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in front of a subway station, they have since performed numerous play adaptations of famous (and not-so-famous) works of cautionary fiction or troubling non-fiction, ranging from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (Burns 2001). Because most surveillance cameras are not sound-equipped, the troupe narrates their performances with large, white placard signs, which they hold up for remotely located camera operators to read. A performance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for instance, uses placards describing scene locations (e.g. "ROOM 101") or key lines from the book (e.g. "WE ARE THE DEAD") (Marcus 2000). When possible, fellow troupe members document the plays with video cameras and distribute information brochures to curious spectators. The players are routinely confronted by security guards or NYC Police and asked to disperse, often before the conclusion of their performances.

Up close, it appears as if the SCP are directing their messages at camera operators, police, or security guards. Their determination to notice and respond to video surveillance, rather than let it fade uninterrogated into the urban landscape, places them in confrontation with institutional representatives. By speaking to cameras (and their representatives), the actors become perceived as

6. www.notbored.org/the-scp.html

threats to the political and economic systems that support and indeed demand public surveillance, so institutional agents move in to contend with the perceived threat. As with Steve Mann's concentration on individuals, SCP performances force interactions with others, and, because of this, they draw attention to the always present embodiment of surveillance technologies and the social relations they engender.

If one takes a step back, however, the SCP are really performing for the public: they enroll the unwitting police and security personnel into their play so that the public can witness the spectacle and perhaps the absurdity of modern surveillant relations. The troupe acknowledges this staging explicitly: "The SCP no longer consider their primary audience to be the police officers and security guards who monitor the surveillance cameras installed in public places. Today, the SCP concentrate on the people who happen to walk by and see one of their performances" (SCP 2005a). In a mode true to their "situationist" theoretical orientation, the SCP affirm that the revolutionary potential of art thoroughly infuses everyday life because everyday life is a complex artistic performance. In this vein, the SCP seek to repoliticize the everyday by inviting the public to participate in their performances, by inviting all of us to recognize that we are already enmeshed in political performances and that we are required to act—and act well.

The primary adversary for the SCP is the state. They are concerned about the erosion of public space and personal privacy brought about by the state's support of police surveillance and its permissive non-regulation of private surveillance. They write:

The SCP is firmly convinced that the use of video surveillance in public places for the purposes of law enforcement is unconstitutional, and that each image captured by police surveillance cameras is an unreasonable search. We also believe that it is irresponsible of the government to allow unlicensed private companies to install as many surveillance cameras as they please, and to install them wherever they please. (SCP 2001)

The implication is that the state is not living up to its responsibility to safeguard civil liberties through improved regulation of public surveillance. Thus, SCP performances confront individual agents of public sector and private sector security, but their primary audience is the general public, whom they hope to cast as transformative actors who can collectively agitate for social change, especially on the level of public policy.

* * *

Both Steve Mann's Shooting Back project and the SCP performances intervene on an explicitly social level by challenging institutional agents of surveillance. Mann draws upon relatively sophisticated technical apparatuses to place store representatives in uncomfortable positions. By doing so, he aims to reflect

back to them the hypocritical logics and empty rhetoric that they impose upon others and to raise their awareness about their complicity with the surveillance society. The SCP, on the other hand, employ decidedly low-tech counter-surveillance props (e.g. signs and costumes) to address police and security guards with the aim of creating a public spectacle—and to raise public awareness about the everyday surveillance spectacle of which we are all already a part.

These two interventions share in common their focus on individual representatives of institutionalized surveillance. By engaging with store employees or speaking to those behind the cameras, Mann and the SCP seek to reveal and challenge the larger structures and rationalities that those individuals represent. A key difference is that the SCP overtly enroll members of the public in activist performances, whereas Mann's project only invites public involvement through the technical mediation of websites. Because of this difference, the SCP seem more successful at moving beyond their initial site of intervention (the individual) to critique institutions for their dominance over the public (which is a relationship betrayed by the ironic juxtaposition of police removing SCP performers from public streets while private companies remain free to monitor the public at will).

While each of the four counter-surveillance interventions covered so far seeks to raise public awareness and to mobilize for social change, none of them are completely successful at moving their critique from the individual to the institutional plane. The SCP come closest to doing this, but so far their plays remain too isolated and discrete to effect long-term change. This deficiency may be in part because activists construct surveillance problems in individualized and abstracted terms in order to make them somewhat tractable and receptive to intervention. The challenge lies in ratcheting-up the unit of analysis to the institutional level so that lasting change can be effected. The desired outcomes might take the form of better regulation and oversight of surveillance and/or meaningful democratic participation in the process of setting surveillance policies, for instance. In the long run, as the next section will argue, the oppositional framing of surveillance versus counter-surveillance may be counter-productive for achieving these goals.

Counter-surveillance and Global Systems of Control

When viewed from a distance, surveillance and counter-surveillance appear to be engaged in a complicated dance, with the larger, cumbersome partner pushing and pulling while the smaller, defter dancer negotiates herself or himself—and others—out of harm's way. The oafish leader is, of course, the state and corporate apparatus surveilling the public, and the partner is the collective of activist adversaries circumventing or destabilizing surveillance systems. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's insights about the disciplinary potential of modern bureaucratic regimes, one could read this as a disciplinary or panoptic relationship (Foucault 1977). But Foucault was also insistent upon the *productive*

capacity of power to generate and sustain social relations apart from any property of control that might be possessed by individuals. As Gilles Deleuze wonderfully explicates: “Power has no essence; it is simply operational. It is not an attribute but a relation: the power-relation is the set of possible relations between forces, which passes through the dominated forces no less than through the dominating . . .” (Deleuze 1988, 27). Therefore, the metaphor of the panopticon (or all-seeing prison) is not a static or transcendent statement of disciplinary power, but is instead a contingent and situated articulation of modernity in a fluid field of production regimes (Foucault 1980; Deleuze 1992).

In explicit response to Foucault’s work, Michel de Certeau’s book *The Practice of Everyday Life* provides a point of departure for thinking about the agency of individuals and groups within disciplinary power structures. For de Certeau (1984), the practices of the dominant dancer clearly would be *strategic* ones of building control structures to regulate the activities of those in the field of power, whereas the practices of the defter dancer would be much more *tactical*, poaching-off the existing structures to create new meanings and possibilities. The two dancers may be in opposition, but that does not change the fact that they are engaged in a reciprocal relationship and collective activity but—importantly—without comparable degrees of power. It is this tense connection that is worth probing, even if there is never an embrace or a union, because after all the exchanges of strategic structuring and tactical appropriation the dance has moved somewhere across the floor and created a pattern, or a logic, or a world that was not there before.⁷

Examples of this problematic, if not dialectical, relationship between surveillance and counter-surveillance practitioners abound. After the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles was captured on videotape in 1991, this did not necessarily catalyze correctives to actions of police brutality, nor did it motivate greater police engagement with urban communities. Instead, police have seemingly used this event to distance themselves further from and maintain antagonistic relationships with communities (Klein 1997; Monahan 2002) while learning from the blow-up that they must exert greater control over the conditions where brutality occurs. This enhanced and learned control can be seen in the torture case of Haitian worker Abner Louima by the New York City Police in 1997. Louima was beaten in a vehicle on the way to the 70th Precinct station house and was then sodomized with the stick from a toilet plunger in the police restrooms (Mazelis 1997; Jeffries 2002). Regardless of the fact that the story did finally emerge, the police officers obviously exercised extreme caution in regulating the places of abuse (i.e. in a police vehicle and in a police restroom), and one can speculate that this level of control was a response to their fear of being under surveillance, and thus held accountable, for their actions.

7. Cameron (2004) likens this type of movement to “spy vs. spy” behavior, noting that “Choosing to address the problems of surveillance through technological fixes opens up some strategic options and shuts down others,” perhaps deepening our “subjection” (Cameron 2004, 143).

Another example of the dance of surveillance and counter-surveillance can be witnessed in the confrontations occurring at globalization protests throughout the world. Activists have been quite savvy in videotaping and photographing police and security forces as a technique not only for deterring abuse, but also for documenting and disseminating any instances of excessive force. According to accounts by World Trade Organization protesters, the police, in turn, now zero-in on individuals with video recorders and arrest them (or confiscate their equipment) as a first line of defense in what has become a war over the control of media representations (Fernandez 2005). Similarly, vibrant Independent Media Centers are now routinely set up at protest locations, allowing activists to produce and edit video, audio, photographic, and textual news stories and then disseminate them over the Internet, serving as an outlet for alternative interpretations of the issues under protest (Breyman 2003). As was witnessed in the beating of independent media personnel and destruction of an Indymedia center by police during the 2001 G8 protests in Genoa, Italy (Independent Media Center Network 2001; Juris 2005), those with institutional interests and power are learning to infiltrate “subversive” counter-surveillance collectives and vitiate their potential for destabilizing the dominant system.

A final telling example of the learning potential of institutions was the subsequent 2002 G8 meeting held in Kananaskis, which is a remote and difficult to access mountain resort in Alberta, Canada. Rather than contend with widespread public protests and a potential repeat of the police violence in Genoa (marked by the close-range shooting and death of a protester), the mountain meeting exerted the most extreme control over the limited avenues available for public participation: both reporters and members of the public were excluded, and a “no-fly-zone” was enforced around the resort.

It could be that grassroots publicizing of protests (through Indymedia, for example) are ultimately more effective than individualized counter-surveillance because they are collective activities geared toward institutional change. While the removal of the 2002 G8 meetings to a publicly inaccessible location was a response to previous experiences with protestors and their publicity machines, this choice of location served a symbolic function of revealing the exclusionary elitism of these organizations, thereby calling their legitimacy into question. So, whereas mainstream news outlets seldom lend any sympathetic ink or air time to anti-globalization protests, many of them did comment on the overt mechanisms of public exclusion displayed by the 2002 G8 meeting (CNN.com 2002; Rowland 2002; Sanger 2002).

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) would describe these ongoing exchanges between dominant and subordinate groups as a mutual and perhaps unwitting advancement of “Empire”—the larger system of global capitalism and its colonization of lifeworlds. They note, for instance, how humanitarian efforts by western countries first establish discursive universal orders—such as “human rights”—as justification for intervention, and then how these universals are capitalized upon by military and economic institutions as rationales for imperialistic invasions. Similarly, activist struggles appear to teach the system

of global capitalism, or those manning its operations, how to increase strategic efficiency by controlling spaces available for political opposition. From this perspective, the flexible ideologies of the 1960s counterculture movements may have disturbed the capitalist system, but in doing so also described a new territory (the self) and a new mode of operation for the growth of capitalism:

Capital did not need to invent a new paradigm (even if it were capable of doing so) because the truly creative moment had already taken place. Capital's problem was rather to dominate a new composition that had already been produced autonomously and defined within a new relationship to nature and labor, a relationship of autonomous production. (Hardt and Negri 2000, 276)

The post-Fordist colonizations of public spaces and resources today are outgrowths of an earlier colonization of "flexibility" as a viable and successful challenge to the rigidities of technocratic bureaucracies.

I would build upon these observations to say that the conflicts between surveillance and counter-surveillance practices today represent a larger struggle over the control of spaces and bodies. It is doubtful that police or security forces are intentionally manipulating spaces and bodies with surveillance and other strategies because they explicitly wish to neutralize democratic opportunities; in fact, they most likely believe that their actions of social control are preserving democracy by safeguarding the *status quo* (Monahan 2006b). Be that as it may, such activities advance neoliberal agendas by eliminating spaces for political action and debate, spaces where effective alternatives to economic globalization could emerge and gain legitimacy if they were not disciplined by police and corporate actions. Therefore, it should not be seen as a coincidence that the demise of public spaces is occurring at the same time that spatial and temporal boundaries are being erased to facilitate the expansion of global capital. The two go hand in hand.

Whereas one can readily critique Hardt and Negri for their attribution of agency to capitalism or to the amorphous force of "Empire," their systemic viewpoint is worth preserving in what has become a contemporary landscape of social fragmentation, polarization, and privatization. Dominant and subordinate groups serve as asymmetrical refractions of each other in emerging global regimes. Surveillance and counter-surveillance are two sets of overlapping practices selectively mobilized by many parties in this conflict, but the overall effect is unknown.

Conclusions

Are counter-surveillance activities political interventions? Yes, they are clearly political. The central question remains, however, as to which counter-surveillance configurations provide *productive* critiques and interventions. Because counter-surveillance movements, in my definition of them, seek to correct unequal distributions of power, they do destabilize *status quo* politics on a case-

by-case basis—on the ground, at specific, temporally bounded sites of contestation. If our vantage point is once removed, however, then individualized counter-surveillance efforts appear to provide the necessary provocations for those with institutional power to diagnose and correct inefficiencies in their mechanisms of control.

Even if this second conclusion is persuasive, however, it should not imply that activists and counter-surveillance practitioners should dispense with their interventionist projects, but instead that they should diligently avoid reproducing the exclusionary logics and reactionary stances of those whom they critique. For instance, high-tech interventions may attract public attention because of their innovative use of technologies, but they can defy replication by others without comparable technical capabilities or resources. Furthermore, focusing on individual agents of surveillance (such as store clerks, security guards, camera operators, or police) artificially reduces the complexity of the problem: many of these individuals are underpaid yet completely dependent upon their jobs, so they might be easy targets, but not necessarily the best ones. The strength of social movements lies in their inclusiveness and in their participatory structures (Breyman 2001; Juris 2004). So while these attributes might signify areas of vulnerability for activists, they remain the magnets that draw people into movements and mobilize them behind causes—they are the qualities that need to be nourished for less individualistic and more effective activism to take root.

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