

CTAL [SPACE]

Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother

edited by Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel

ZKM
Center for Art and Media | Karlsruhe

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

2002

Surveillance Camera Players

— George Orwell's 1984

1998, Performance documentation: video, black-and-white, 9 min

What exactly are the SCP doing?

Bill Browne: In general, the SCP perform plays directly in front of surveillance cameras installed in public places. These plays primarily consist of very large, hand-made placards that are held up to the camera. There is some pantomime as well. The group has about six such plays in its repertoire. Some of them are constructed to be performed in specific places such as churches that have surveillance cameras, etc.

How do you pick the plays? Some choices seem to be logical, like 1984, but why Waiting for Godot?

We picked *Godot* as a kind of joke on the play itself, which, of course, is all words and no action. Surveillance cameras aren't allowed to pick up sound, so any performance of *Godot* would have to be silent! We no longer perform joke plays such as these. These days — since November 1998 — we perform plays that we have written and that directly concern surveillance and privacy rights.

How many people are involved with the SCP, and what are they doing apart from participating there? Any theatre professionals?

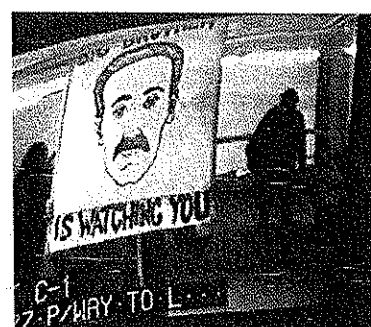
Browne: At any one time, there are about six people in the group, which is informal and very loosely organized. In total, about forty people have performed ever since our founding in November 1996. There are no theatre professionals in the group; never have been. Most of the members are political activists who are involved in a variety of other struggles. We are all anarchists.

What's wrong with surveillance cameras? They are supposed to make the city safer...

The use of surveillance cameras by the police in public places is a flat-out violation of the fourth amendment to the Constitution and the Supreme Court's decision in *Katz vs. the United States* (1967).

Yet it has become quite acceptable. One reason that is usually given, is, as you mention yourself in an essay, that crime is going down. And if this is not the case, as you claim, why would anybody blow the huge amounts of money for installing the cameras and monitoring them?

Let's be clear: crime went down in New York City after the surveillance cameras were installed. Crime went down because the Mayor told the police to arrest huge numbers of poor people for small offenses (50,000 arrests and 2000 alone for marijuana smoking!). The City and the police want to spend large amounts of money on cameras so that they can keep an eye on the people who are protesting against what the City and the police have done. St. Patrick's Cathedral for example: there is no crime there, but here are a lot of political protests against the policies of the Catholic Church. And so the crime-free Cathedral is ringed with very sophisticated digital surveillance cameras.



George Orwell's 1984
1998, Performance
(stills from the video
documentation)
Surveillance Camera
Players

Your "target group" is basically one person. Why all this effort for one guy?

No, our real target group is all the people who wander by and see what we are doing. In NYC, that can be a lot of people; we choose very well-populated areas in which to perform. We were only joking when we said that we were trying to entertain bored security guards and police officers! Fuck 'em!

Yet there is an absurd and somewhat poetic quality to performing a play, an art work, in front of these mechanical eyes. Do you think that this aspect of absurdity is important in what you are doing?

Yes! We think the so-called logic of surveillance is absurd: the cameras make people paranoid in the hope that these paranoid people will act rationally and won't commit crimes. But paranoid people are NOT rational.

What effect do you expect your action to have on people who see it?

Several effects: 1) disrupt their everyday routine; 2) show them that mere individuals or small groups can be very effective; 3) show them there is no need to be terrified of, or be made paranoid by, the cameras; 4) show them that not all protests are loud, angry and without a sense of humor.

This strategy of "disruption" of every day life is these days being used by a lot of other groups. It has become a strategy, for example, in marketing, and whole malls are planned to get people out of their trance. Why do you think this strategy still works? And how do you feel your hand-written posters work compared to the much more perfect and refined methods of "shock" or "guerilla" marketing?

No! Marketing — even "radical" advertising — is designed to keep people in their trances, not wake them up. Advertising is part of the trance-like daily life the SCP wishes to disrupt. As for the high-tech, low-tech contrast between the advertisers and us: we look unprofessional, even absurd, don't we? Good!

Did you ever have any responses from the surveillance guys apart from being asked to leave the premises? How does the rest of the audience (if you want to call the passers-by that) react?

The surveillants find our parodies to be funny, but are offended when we show them a sign that speaks directly to them and says "Mind your own business." The rest of the audience (the real audience for our performances) always agrees with us on this point: the cameras must be labeled with adequate signs. Only a few give us the usual bullshit about fighting crime.

You also do walking tours through New York. What are you doing there?

Teaching other people to do what we do: spot the cameras, which are often disguised as streetlamps or ornaments. We are also making sure that our maps of camera locations are disseminated. This is also an important function of our performances: to get those maps distributed. It's one thing to have someone tell you about the cameras; it's quite another to be able to locate them yourself and see just how many there really are.

Is there any influence of situationist theory on your work?

A great deal. What we do is "detourne" the spectacle of the cameras: rather than destroy them (militant anarchist) or write to our congressman or demonstrate against them (leftist), we turn the cameras against their original purposes and use them for ours. However, I'm sure the SI would have been opposed to the degree to which the SCP use and appear in the mass media.

That was something I was about to ask: if you are so opposed to the spectacle, why participate in it by giving interviews – as we all know the spectacle incorporates and devours anything that it turns attention to...

We feed the spectacle poison disguised as bird seed.

Do you see yourself in the tradition of political street theater from the 1970s?

Yes. We are big fans of the *Living Theater*.

Groups like the Living Theatre don't really exist anymore, and one reason for that might be that the notion of the public sphere has changed. Maybe the real social discourse and the real live public don't happen on the street anymore, but in "the media." So one could argue that this kind of public street theatre doesn't reach the "public," or just a tiny fraction of it...

But the *Living Theatre* group is very much alive! They perform both indoors, in a traditional theater, and outdoors, in public! As for your comments about "the media," it may be true for some people – those with money, power, access to the media – that the public sphere is unnecessary or undesirable/scary. But there are some people for whom the street and public space is literally everything (the homeless, obviously, but others as well).

What role does the Internet play in what you are doing?

It allows us to make contact with like-minded people all over the world. It gets us coverage from people who do not speak English as their first language. We've been written about or profiled on TV in Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch and German.

Interview by Tilman Baumgärtel

Tilman Baumgärtel,
*net art, Z.G. Neue Materialien
zur Netzkunst. New Materials
towards Net art.*
Verlag für moderne Kunst,
Nuremberg 2001

Institute for Applied Autonomy

— iSee

2001, online web project: <http://www.redsee.org>

iSee – Now more than ever

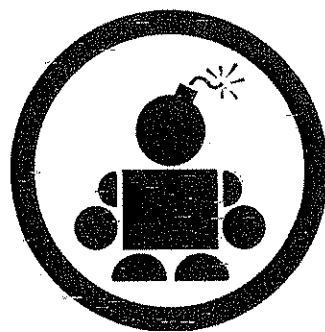
iSee is a web-based application that helps individuals avoid closed-circuit television (CCTV) surveillance cameras in public space. Visitors to the *iSee* website (www.appliedautonomy.com/isee/) are presented a map of New York City, with the locations of all known CCTV cameras as documented by the NYC Surveillance Camera Project (<http://www.mediaeater.com/cameras/>) displayed prominently in red. By clicking on this map, a user indicates points of origin and destination. Route-planning software developed by the Institute for Applied Autonomy (www.appliedautonomy.com) then displays a “path of least surveillance” between the two points. By following this path, individuals may safely navigate around the city without fear of unwanted monitoring.

iSee is intended as a public service that protects individual privacy and safeguards civil liberties. *iSee* also serves a pedagogical function, raising public awareness of the omnipresence of CCTV in public space and challenging the effectiveness and appropriateness of remote surveillance in general.

An analysis of the far reaching effects of CCTV is available on the *iSee* website: (<http://www.appliedautonomy.com/isee/info.html>). The research details the threats posed by CCTV to many members of the general public, including youth, women, and ethnic minorities. The essay draws upon current research in criminology and sociology to challenge CCTVs effectiveness in reducing crime, and to expose the economic and political incentives contributing to CCTVs widespread adoption in the UK, US, and Canada.

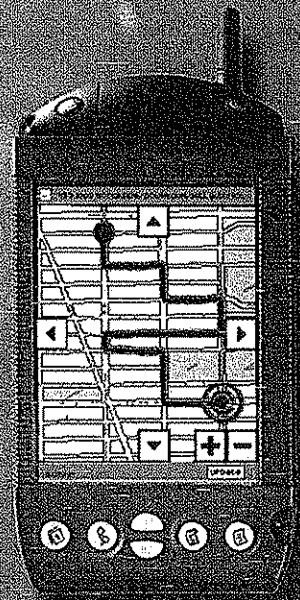
The I.A.A. recognizes that, given heightened awareness of public safety and demands for greater security prompted by recent acts of terrorist violence, projects that undermine systems of social control may appear to some viewers to be in poor-taste. It is our position that such times call out all the more strongly for precisely these kinds of projects. As private interests cynically exploit public fears to undermine civil liberties in the name of social control and corporate profits, there is a growing need for dissidents to raise public awareness and to directly undermine the capabilities of these interests. *iSee* is an attempt to engage CCTV and its proponents on both these fronts.

I.A.A.



redSee

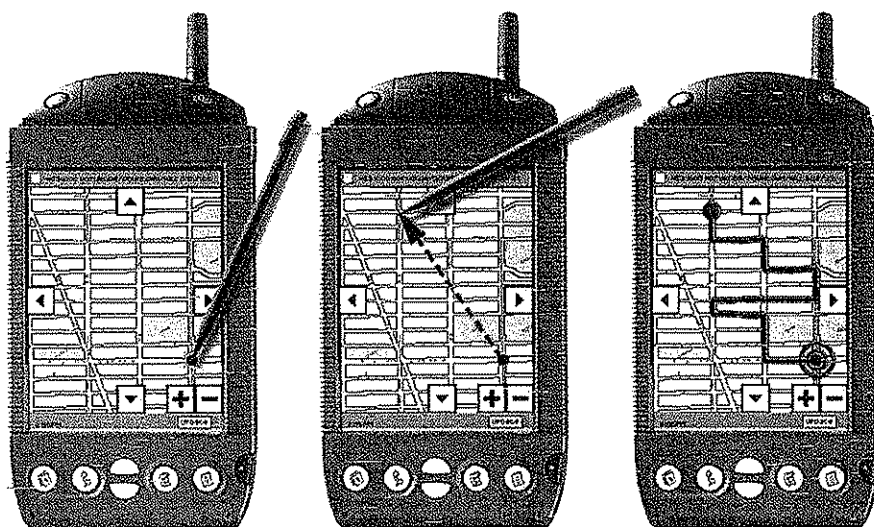
The path of least surveillance



www.redsee.com

a project of the Institute for Applied Autonomy

iSee
2001, online web project
<http://www.redsee.org>
Institute for Applied
Autonomy



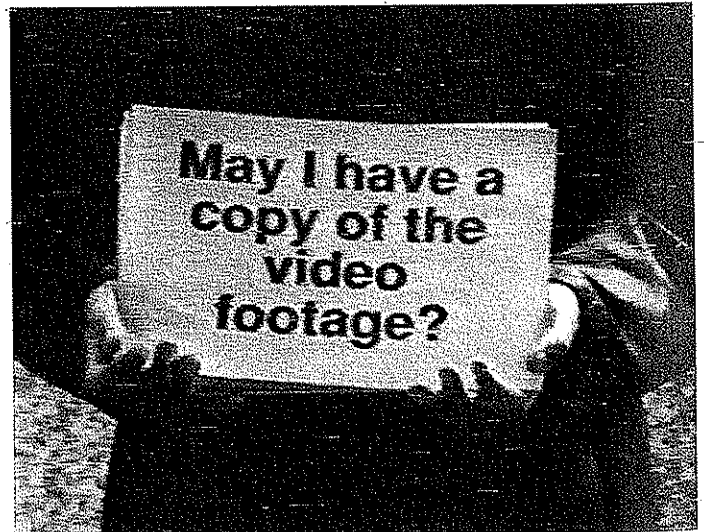
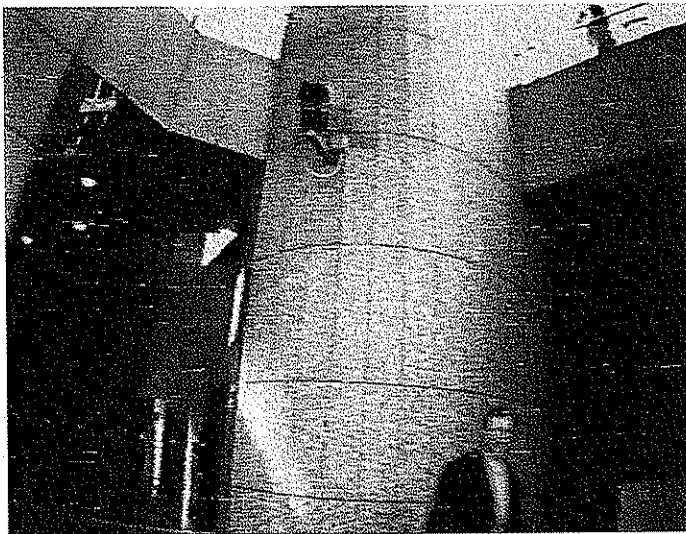
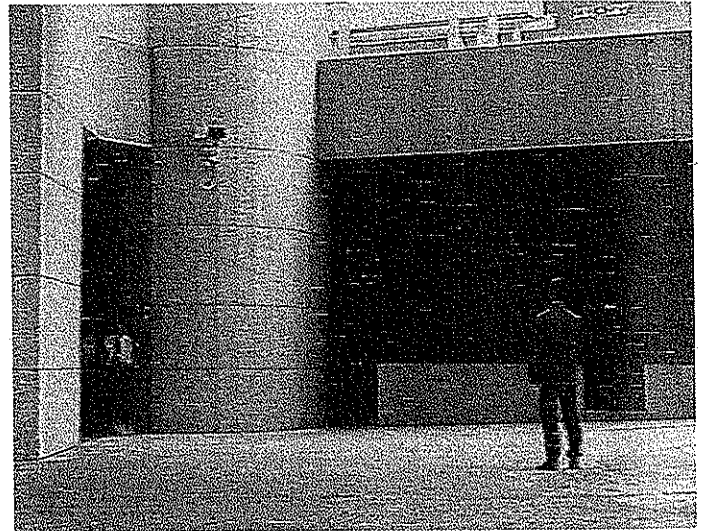
Denis Beaubois

— In the event of Amnesia the city will recall

Part I & II: Sydney & Cleveland Performance
1996-1997, video, black-and-white, 7:41 min

Denis Beaubois and the Performative Politics of Panoptical Détournement

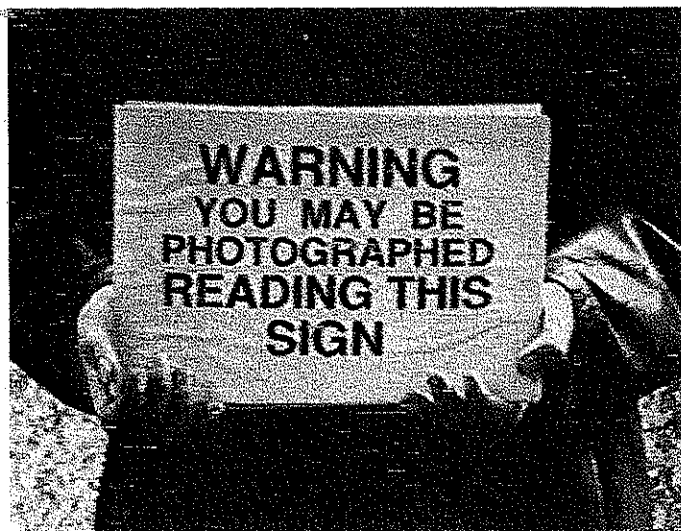
In June 1996 the Australian artist Denis Beaubois embarked on a series of performances which took place throughout the city of Sidney in public spaces marked by the more or less visible presence of the increasingly ubiquitous surveillance camera. Arriving on the scene three days in a row unannounced and without having solicited or received permission to do so, Beaubois simply positioned himself in direct view of the camera whose impassive gaze he returned in kind. Armed with an unusual capacity for willed immobility (thanks to training in Bodyweather performance technique, a form of Butoh), his ostentatious stasis and ocular fixity sooner or later provoked some sort of response. Sometimes

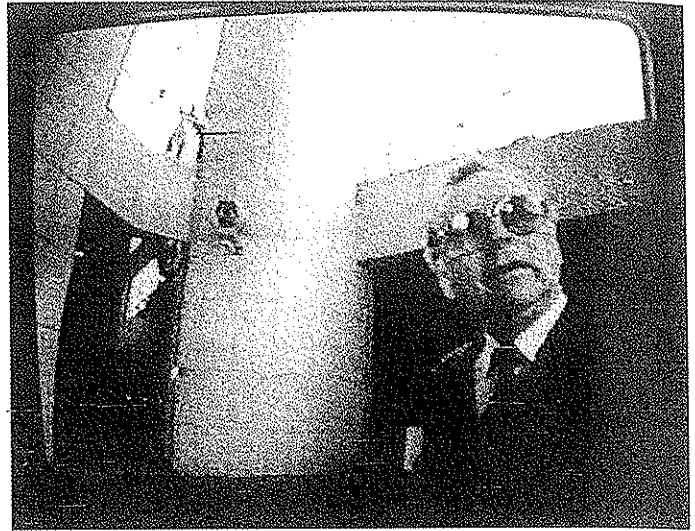


it was so swift that Beaubois was “escorted” off the “public” premises only minutes after his arrival, the “explanation” being that he was disturbing the peace, or lacked a permit, or some equally inconsequential – and symptomatic – bureaucratic banality. On other occasions, where his stoic performances were graciously (even if often uncomprehendingly) tolerated by the authorities, it was the passersby who became engaged by his presence, interrupting their purposive passage to stare and inquire in an attempt to establish what exactly was going on.

What exactly was going on here? According to Beaubois, these performances, entitled *In the event of Amnesia, the city will recall ...* posed a series of questions to the site which explored the dynamic between what he calls the “primary” and the “secondary” audience. The primary audience, as in the classical performance situation, is the “targeted” collective who is both willing and eager to watch and interpret. In the context of the *Amnesia* performances, this primary audience was, as Beaubois put it, “the surveillance camera (or those who monitor them).” The character of this particular “audience’s” spectatorship is highly teleological: scanning the scene with a “watchdog consciousness,” it measures all behaviors against a template of norms and responds pre-emptively against any violations. For someone in its field of vision this means that by “citing” any of the profiles in its database (by means of one’s appearance – race, fashion, etc. – or behavior) one can

*In the event of Amnesia
the city will recall,
Part I: Sydney Australia
Performance
1996, videostills
Photography:
S. Armistead, M. Comrow,
R. Gracie, T. Ralph,
D. Rogers
Editors: Denis Beaubois,
Gary Frew
Denis Beaubois*





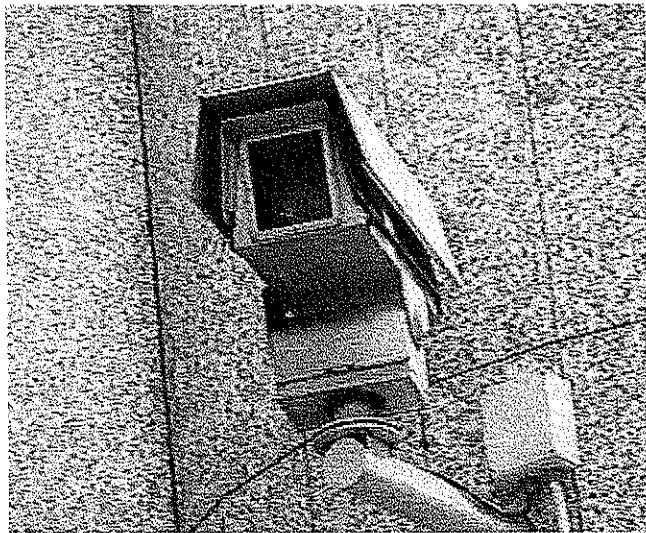
readily “become” a suspect and provoke the system to focus its attention on oneself. In so doing, however, the apparatus could also be said to become part of the performance. For Beaubois the consequence of this proleptic character of surveillant observation (i.e., the fact that it already knows what it is going to see) is a mutually ideal condition: from the perspective of the camera, it effectively ensures that he will be read and attended to as suspicious; and from the point of view of the performer/suspect, it guarantees that he will be accorded an attentive and vigilant audience.

Texts also play a role in the *Amnesia* performances, albeit in a slightly different manner. Having captured the attention of both the “primary” and “secondary” audiences (i.e. the surveillance apparatus and the bystanders) by means of his interrogative corporeal fixity, on day two (indicatively titled “the introduction”) Beaubois begins holding up in front of his stomach a series of white sheets with printed texts, starting with one that contains only his name. Willingly proffering to the system information which it is meant to establish against one’s will is, as such, already deeply suspicious, which in turn only makes the performer/suspect of greater “interest.” Having thereby further riveted the attention of one (if not both) of his audiences, the silent Beaubois then suddenly shifts registers. On day three of this silent performance (entitled “the dialogue and the response”) the text sheets begin to invoke their media-historical antecedents – the intertitles of early cinema – not only *formally* qua text frames that interrupt the “action” of the performance, but also *functionally* in that like these, the texts now also begin conveying crucial *narrative* information. “May I have a copy of the video footage?” the next card inquires, indicating, through instructions spelled out on the two that follow, that a positive answer is to be indicated by moving the camera up and down, while a negative response is to be conveyed by moving the camera side to side.

Baubois’s request for a copy of the “footage” points not only to the fact – and general unavailability – of surveillance as *taped record*, but also to the concomitant and uncomfortable panoptic possibility which always haunts surveillance systems based on taping: that the camera may not even be manned, i.e., that it may simply be recording without anyone watching in so-called “real” time. Since one cannot know for sure we must assume there is, but a response to such a query would nevertheless be an ambivalently welcome corroboration that our “performance” does indeed have an “audience.”

The phantasmatic possibility of a dialogic relation with the surveillant apparatus that it invokes, however, is precisely what is staged in the *Amnesia* performance through what one could call the *semanticization of the PTZ* [Pan, Tilt and Zoom] camera. Ingeniously recasting the *mechanics* of the apparatus as a *semantics*, i.e., as a meaning-bearing economy,

*In the event of Amnesia
the city will recall,
Part I: Sydney Australia
Performance
1996, videostills
Photography:
S. Armistead, M. Comrow,
R. Gracie, T. Ralph,
D. Rogers
Editors: Denis Beaubois,
Gary Frew
Denis Beaubois*



we see the camera pan from side to side “in response” to Beaubois’ request. The hilarious anthropomorphisation which is the condition of possibly reading this “denial” of his request would seem to quell all panoptical doubts (and in this case also thespian anxiety): If I was concerned before that nobody was actually watching me, I can rest assured, since the discursive character of the camera movement, the semantics of the mechanics, clearly confirms that we are dealing with some form of agency. But does it really? Given the

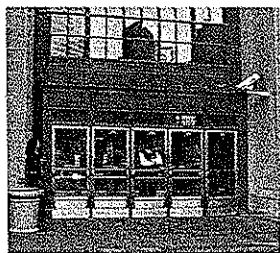
irreducible dimension of projection involved in such a dynamic, how can we deny the possibility that the seemingly so expressive PTZ movement was in fact totally random and (in this case) fortuitous? If this were so, then we would still not know *for sure* whether there was someone in the tower, as it were (even as we would have to assume that there was). The foregrounding of this undecidability is one of the key elements of Beaubois’s *Amnesia* performances.

In response to the “refusal” of the request for a copy of the video tape – which at first glance would seem only to confirm the imbalance of power characteristic of the surveillant *dispositif* – the final text frame retrospectively reveals that this was, in fact, a strictly rhetorical question. “Warning,” it reads, “you may be photographed reading this sign.” Indeed, Beaubois is not really asking since he is not according the apparatus the meek acquiescence it assumes (and all-too-often gets). On the contrary, Beaubois has instead answered the question in advance and in the affirmative: he has no need to wait to be given a copy of the surveillant video footage because he himself is *taking* that footage *himself*, “shooting back” as it were, to use the phrase so aptly invoked by the Toronto-based digital media activist Steve Mann to describe his counter-surveillance practices. In fact Beaubois’ video records of his *Amnesia* performances in Sidney involve quite a lot of shooting, a three-camera set-up which includes one behind and on the same plane as Beaubois that provides many of the “establishing” shots, one located above the surveillance camera (thus able to invoke, even if it cannot exactly reproduce, the latter’s high-angle optical vector), and one wide-angle camera attached to the performer’s chest. The carefully edited and elegantly structured video that serves as the record of this performative *détournement* of the Panopticon – and circulates in an art-world economy – reveals that *both* Beaubois’ primary and secondary audiences must in fact be understood as components of a performance which is staged, one could say, for the tertiary audiences in galleries, museums, and at film and video festivals. Here, at least from time to time, there actually is somebody watching.

Thomas Y. Levin

*In the event of Amnesia
the city will recall,
Part II:
Cleveland Performance
1997, videostills
Denis Beaubois*

ersion published in
SPACE | die wachsame
chaft, *International
artlaward 2001*, Süd-
funk Baden-Baden,
entrum für Kunst
dientechnologie,
he 2001



New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) — Surveillance Camera Project

1998, webproject: <http://www.mediaeater.com/cameras/>

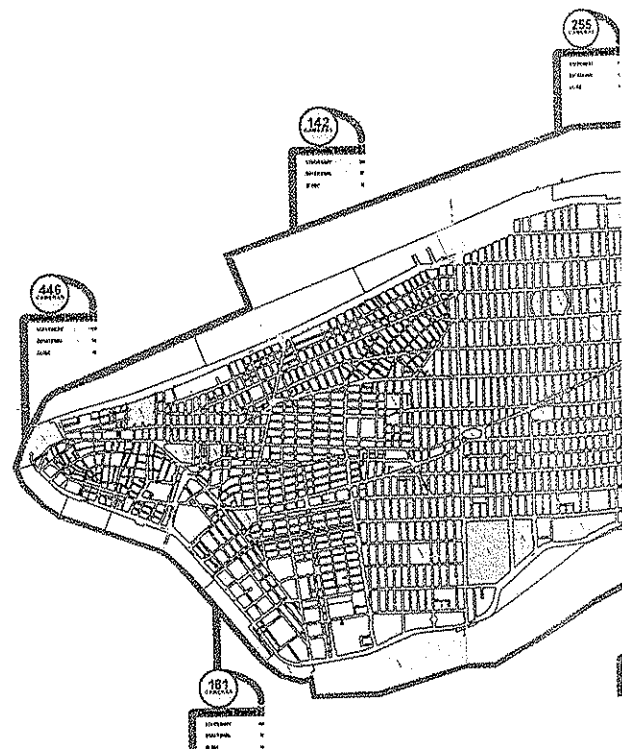
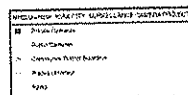
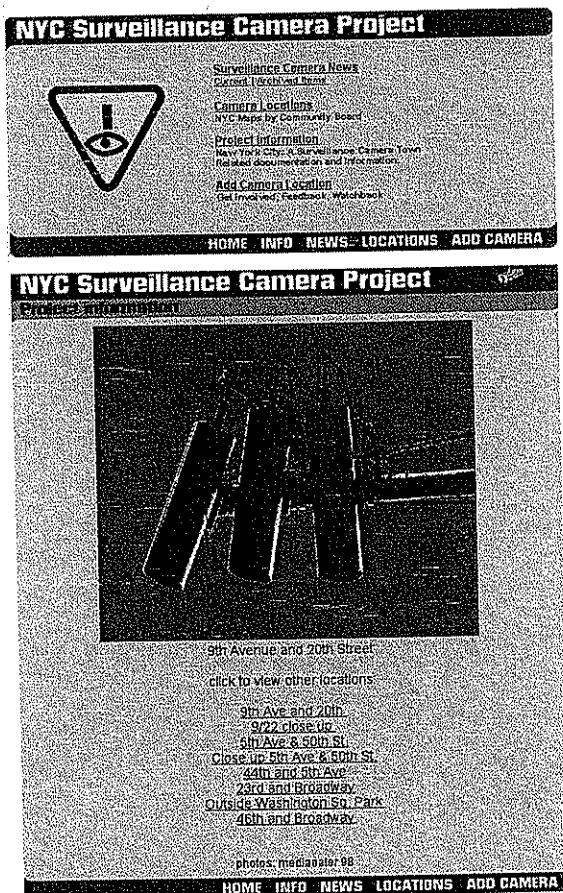
The Making of the Map

Over five months, a small but dedicated group of New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU)¹ volunteers walked the streets of Manhattan in search of video surveillance cameras. This group sought out every camera, public or private, which records people in public space. Mostly by foot, but occasionally by car, they covered every block in the borough. From the records they made of all camera locations, the volunteers produced a comprehensive map of surveillance cameras in Manhattan. The map includes cameras that are readily visible from the city streets. This means that the cameras may be located in private or public spaces, but record action in the latter. However, we cannot represent that all visible cameras are continuously functioning.

The private cameras may be inside an alcove and pointed out, above a garage door or affixed to the wall of a private building and pointed down a block. The public cameras may be on traffic or streetlight poles or affixed to a public building. Cameras are labeled as either public or private based upon the assumed ownership of the structure to which they are affixed.

NYC Surveillance
Camera Project
1998, webproject:
<http://www.mediaeater.com/cameras/>
NYCLU

1. <http://NYCLU.org/index.html>

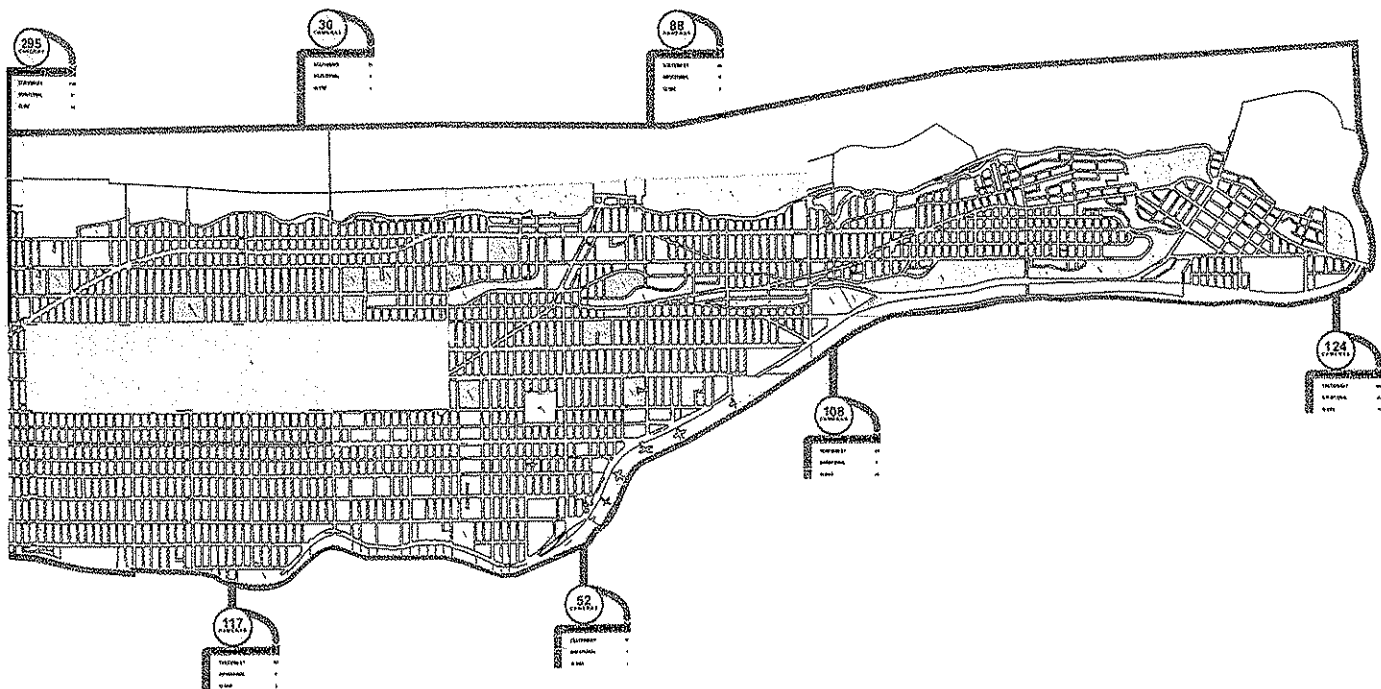


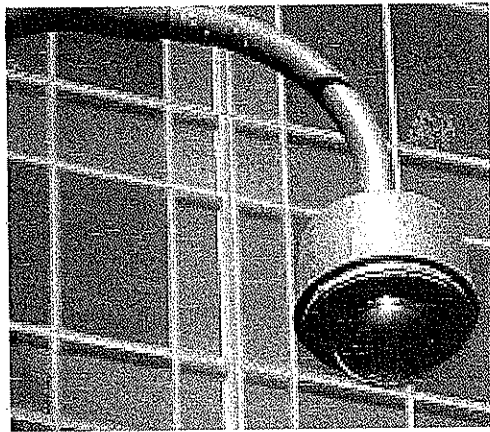
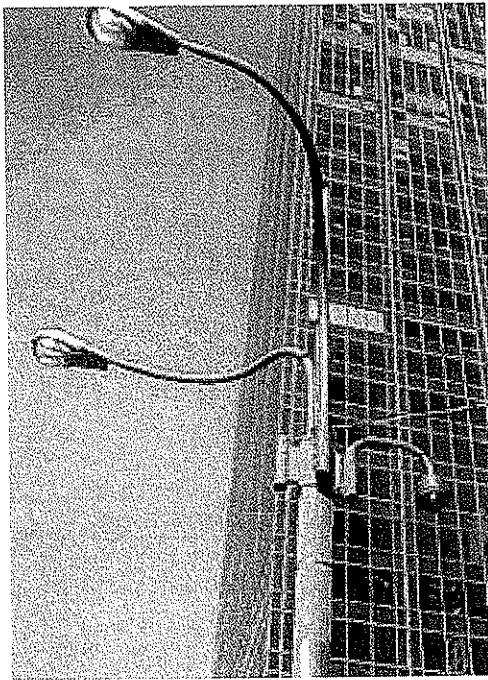
Although the group saw 2,397 cameras in Manhattan, the map they created is far from exhaustive. As slowly as they walked and as carefully as they looked, cameras have escaped their search. A few because the volunteers were busily writing down the location of a camera nearby, but many more because the cameras were hidden from sight. Whether tucked surreptitiously out of the line of vision or small enough to escape detection, we believe many more cameras currently watch our city streets than appear on the map. And numerous others are continually being installed.

Creating a map of Manhattan is just the first stage of the project. The NYCLU plans to expand the map to include all cameras that record public spaces in all five boroughs. Then, the NYCLU will continually update the city-wide map to reflect what we predict to be a growing number of surveillance cameras in the city.

The Philosophy Behind the Project

Video surveillance cameras have arrived on the streets of New York City. But it is up to us to decide if they are here to stay, and if they are, then under what conditions. Commonplace outside private companies, storefronts and apartment buildings, in parks and at intersections, surveillance cameras have been passively accepted as necessary for our personal safety. At this stage in their proliferation, we need to take an active, not passive, role in the decision-making process that allows for the installation of video surveillance cameras. In certain situations, cameras do afford us an important sense of safety: when they watch the entryway of our apartment buildings or the loading dock of our businesses. But there is an equal, if not greater, number of situations in which cameras become not protective, but invasive. Placed in changing rooms and bathrooms, cameras record peoples most private moments on tape, tapes on which footage of women





NYC Surveillance
Camera Project
1998, webproject:
<http://www.mediaeater.com/cameras/>
NYCLU

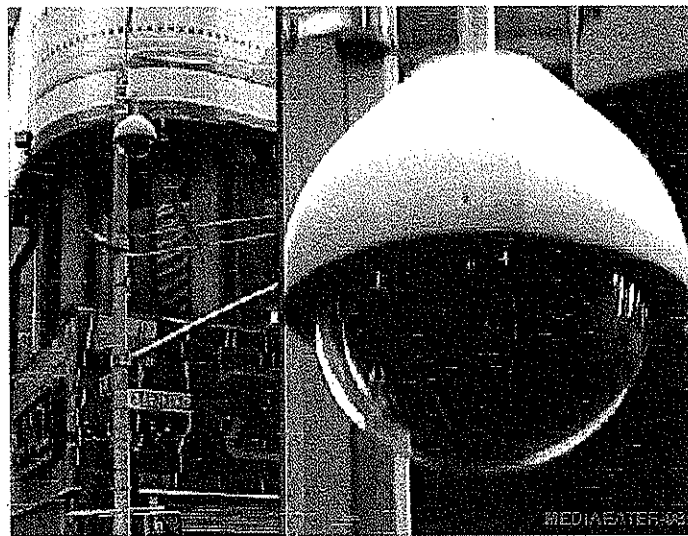
undressing or using the bathroom is often reviewed by men. In these examples, the deleterious nature of video surveillance is obvious. But in other situations the invasive presence of a camera is not as blatant, but it is equally as intrusive.

When cameras are mounted on street corners, the vast majority of the time they monitor people engaged in innocent and lawful activities. However, these innocent activities may be confidential and personally damaging if the tapes fall into the wrong hands. Public spaces often serve as meeting ground for lawyers and clients, reporters and sources and businesspeople and politicians who want to talk privately. Cameras also capriciously watch off-guard moments: a cigarette break or a kiss goodbye, which, at one point or another, most everyone has not wanted captured on video. Even more critically, cameras prevent law-abiding citizens who hold political or social views not accepted by the majority from expressing themselves freely. Michael Rosano of the New York City Gay & Lesbian Anti-Violence Project feels that the installation of cameras along places like the Greenwich Village piers, a cruising strip for gay men, will stop many same sex couples from even holding hands for fear "that the tapes would get into the wrong hands." Similarly, the threat of cameras targeting certain races of people has been raised. Will African Americans be automatically considered suspicious to the camera, or the person behind the lens? We must address these issues and question the motives behind decisions like that which led to the New York City Police Department's reported taping of large segments of the Million Youth March in Harlem on Labor Day Weekend, 1998.

Video Surveillance cameras have arrived with effectively no organized discussion or debate on their role in our city. Even

less has been accomplished in regards to developing and implementing uniform standards that should apply to use of surveillance equipment: There are a slew of issues to be raised and questions to be answered regarding the presence of cameras in public spaces. Until these are addressed, we cannot expect that everyone who wants to install a camera will carefully weigh the pros and cons of its installation, the location chosen and the ultimate destination of the video footage. Even after video surveillance is raised as a topic of public debate, informal decisions will be ineffectual without formal guidelines to regulate video surveillance of public space.

Since the inception of vast databases of video footage, software companies have been designing and marketing facial recognition software, a biometrics technique through which a computer can identify people on tape. Visionics, one of the leading companies in the market, boasts that its software, FaceIt, can automatically locate faces in complex scenes, track and identify who they are totally hands-off, continuously and in real-time. Software and Systems International touts its software, Mandrake, for its ability to identify faces taking into account "head orientation, lighting conditions, skin color, spectacles, make-up and earrings, facial expression, facial hair and aging." And each of these identification software can be used covertly, and legally, without the consent of the individual being tracked.



The use of video surveillance equipment, the formation of networks and the employment of facial recognition software heighten fear on our streets. An innocent person walking in public has no control over his own actions: who may record them and what the monitor may do with the tape. With the current ubiquity of cameras, the actual ends of individual tape becomes a moot point. The fear of being watched has already been instituted. The city grid morphs into a modern panopticon, a circular prison conceived by the eighteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham. From his tower at the center of the prison, the watchman can always peer into every cell, although not simultaneously. Because of his ability to do so, the threat of surveillance becomes as great as the surveillance itself. Our modern panopticon is making prisoners of us all, as we are constantly under the gaze of the camera. Whether it is acting alone or as one in a vast network, we cannot tell, we can only safely presume the latter. We can only presume that the watchman, whoever or wherever he may be, is watching us now.

NYC Surveillance
Camera Project
1998, webproject:
<http://www.mediaeater.com/cameras/>
NYCLU

NYCLU

Reprint from <http://www.mediaeater.com/cameras/>

The Team
Norman Siegel,
Executive Director;
Ibrahim Rubama,
Board of Directors;
Chris Johnson, Coordinator;
Bradley McCallum,
Artist-In-Residence;
Greg Bezkorovainy;
Ailysen Bowen;
Mark Ghuneim;
Caroline Hall;
Rebecca Kelley;
Greg Loftis;
Leigh Ann Mahler;
Matt McGuinness;
Kirsten O'Malley;
Kay Sirianni;
Arthur Kimball Stanley