Visual Surveillance.
Transmedial Migrations of a Scopic Form

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Abstract. Analyzing a series of works realized in the media of performance and photography (Vito Acconci, Sophie Calle), video installation (Michael Snow, Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham) and found footage cinema (Michael Klier, Eyal Sivan, Harun Farocki) we will observe how the act of visual surveillance can be enacted or detected in different media while maintaining its defining characteristic: the disciplining power of an asymmetric gaze which is more and more present across the social space, thanks to the proliferation of video cameras, and which since the late 1960s has been explored by different generations of artists in all its political, psychological and aesthetic dimensions. The result will be a reflection on one of the possible ways of understanding the phenomenon of intermediality: in this case, intermediality as the transmedial migrations of a scopic form, of a way of seeing.

Theatricality and Surveillance

In an article published in 1967 in the magazine Artforum with the title Art and Objecthood (Fried 1967), the American art critic Michael Fried, together with Clement Greenberg, the most influential representative of the ‘modernist’ trend of American art criticism in the 1960s, described the then current art scene as characterized by the confrontation between two opposite poles, the “pictorial” and the “theatrical.” On the one side of this opposition he saw the modernist paintings of artists such as Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski, focused on the exploration of the specific elements of the pictorial medium (form, colour, frame, the bidimensionality of the canvas), while on the other he placed the theatricality of Minimalism: the sculptures consisting of abstract geometrical volumes (cubes, parallelepipeds, bars, slabs) by artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Tony Smith, which introduced in the artworld the anonymity and the seriality of industrial forms, but at the same time were characterized, according to Fried,
by an undeniable anthropomorphic dimension, since their presence in front of the eyes and of the body of the spectator was something very similar to the presence of a person. Given their position in space and their dimensions, such Minimalist sculptures seemed to ‘acknowledge’ the presence of the spectator and to ‘address’ him or her explicitly, whereas one of the defining traits of modernist painting was for Fried the decision to ignore altogether the spectator, locking the work of art in a condition of absolute and impenetrable self-sufficiency.

The confrontation between these two tendencies in the artistic scene of the 1960s is described by Fried as a real clash in which what is at stake is not only the alternative between two styles or two different approaches to art making, but the very distinction between what is art and what is not: “Theatre and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such [...]. The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre [...]. Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre” (Fried 1967, 163–164). One of the main reasons why Fried rejected radically the theatrical openness of the Minimalist works, while at the same time celebrating the self-sufficient closure of modernist painting, had to do with the different forms of spectatorial experience implied by such works. According to a conviction shared in those years also by Clement Greenberg, the modernist work of art had the property of being at every instant entirely present and accessible in front of the eyes of the beholder, who ideally should have been able to ‘capture’ the work with a single, immediate and instantaneous glance. As we read in Art and Objecthood, “it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theatre” (Fried 1967, 167). On the contrary, the aesthetics of theatricality conceived the relation between spectator and artwork as a process diluted in time and, most of all, open and not fully determined. A relationship predisposed by the artist, but which needed the active presence of the spectator in order to be progressively activated and developed.

As we know now, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the crisis of the modernist aesthetics and the success and proliferation of the theatrical tendency that had been so harshly condemned by Fried. The artists working in those years within the fields of performance, happenings, body art and video art explored in all directions the dynamic relationship between the work of art and the spectator, initiating different forms of interactivity which in many cases – for example in the famous performances by Marina Abramović and Ulay – involved
directly the body of the artist. In all these works, the spectator was considered as a constitutive factor of the work of art, i.e. as one of the poles around which the artistic intervention was structured. Such a spectator, depending on the situation, had to be confronted, attracted, seduced, shocked or even physically assaulted; let free to interact with the work in an unpredictable way but also, often, captured, constrained, subjected to various forms of control and surveillance.

Among the various forms of spectatorial experience explored by the artists beginning with the late 1960s, it is precisely this last relationship of surveillance that will be the focus of our attention in the following pages. Following a line that begins with a performance enacted by Vito Acconci in 1969 and ends with some recent found footage films by Harun Farocki, we will examine a body of works employing different media configurations in order to see how contemporary art has established itself in the last few decades as a particularly stimulating field in which to detect and enact the various dynamics of seeing and being seen in all their aesthetic, psychological, political and social dimensions, situating the spectator from time to time, and often at the same time, as object or as subject of a surveillant gaze. What will particularly interest us in the context of a reflection on the elusive notion of intermediality, is the way in which such a relationship of visual surveillance has been explored by the artists we will consider through a variety of different media, with the result of revealing it as a scopic form whose essential traits can manifest themselves in different medial forms.¹

Forms of Video Surveillance: from the Social to the Artistic Field

We can define as visual surveillance – distinguishing it for example from audio surveillance (on which cf. Szendy 2007) – any form of control and discipline which is exercised mainly through the act of seeing. The paradigmatic form of this type of surveillance has been described by Michel Foucault in his famous analysis of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, an optical and architectural device in which Foucault identified the birth of the “disciplinary” society (cf. Bentham 1995 [1791], Foucault 1991 [1975]). The functioning of such a device, as we know,

was based on a precise spatial construction and on a fundamental *asymmetry* of seeing. In Bentham’s *Panopticon* – a flexible structure which according to its author could have been used indifferently as a prison, a hospital, a madhouse, a school or a factory – there is a radical distinction between he who sees and those who are seen: between the guardian located in the central control tower, who sees everything without being seen, and the prisoners / patients / madmen / pupils / workers hosted in the cells surrounding the central tower, who know that they are seen without being able, though, to identify the source of such seeing. In this way, in full coherence with the “utilitarian” approach of its author, the *Panopticon* aimed at maximizing the results while at the same time minimizing the effort: subjecting a potentially large number of individuals to the disciplining power of an invisible surveillant gaze, the *Panopticon* according to Bentham could have eventually functioned even without the presence of anyone in the control tower, since the awareness of being under visual surveillance would have induced a correct behaviour in the individuals hosted in the cells.

Over the last few decades, with the diffusion of video surveillance cameras, the forms of visual surveillance have proliferated through the social space, becoming more flexible and diffused, and extending their reach through a variety of social, institutional, scientific and military domains. Blurring more and more the boundaries between the private and the public, the video surveillance cameras multiply the efficacy of the asymmetric gaze theorized by Bentham without the need of constraining the movements of the individuals under control. As Deleuze noted, the early-modern “disciplinary society” has become a “society of control” (cf. Deleuze 1990), in which discipline is induced across the social spectrum by a diffused and de-localized array of control factors. The video camera plays a key role in this transition: thanks to one of its fundamental characteristics, that of allowing the spectator to receive an immediate feedback, observing live the images being recorded, the video camera multiplies exponentially the power of the panoptic gaze, transforming the social space in a domain that can be potentially rendered entirely visible, transparent, and disciplined.

The political and psychological consequences of the proliferation of such a pervasive surveillant gaze began to be investigated from the late 1960s onwards by a number of artists working with different media, ranging from performance to photography, from video installations to found footage cinema. Examining some of their works may allow us to observe how the practice of visual surveillance can be reformulated in different media while maintaining some of its defining traits.
Surveillance as Performance

Among the artists working on the theme of surveillance through the form of performance we may mention Vito Acconci and Sophie Calle. In his performance entitled Following Piece (1969) [Fig.1], Vito Acconci chose some people randomly encountered in the streets of Manhattan and followed them across the city as long as they remained in a public space. Such following could last only a few minutes, if the people entered in the private space of a house or a car, or various hours if they went to a restaurant or to the movies. At the end of the performance, the results of each following were presented in panels containing the general ‘rules’ governing the performance itself, as well as various photographs, notes and comments referring to each person that had been followed. Several years later, Sophie Calle chose again performance, photography and text in order to explore within the urban space the dynamics of following and being followed, observing and controlling. In a work entitled The Shadow (Detective) [Figs. 2–3], begun in 1981 and completed in 1985, she asked her mother to contact a private investigation agency in order to hire a detective whose task should have been to follow her and take photographs and notes documenting all her movements and activities. In its final form, the work consists of a series of panels which contain both the detective’s photographs that portray the artist seen from behind in a series of locations which eerily recall the movie Vertigo (a cemetery, a park, a museum), and the notes taken by Sophie Calle, who was obviously aware of being followed and who in turn spied on the detective, who was himself unaware of being an object of surveillance.

If from the domain of performance and of its photographic and textual documentations we now move towards artists focusing on the main protagonist of the contemporary forms of visual surveillance, the video camera, we encounter a number of works which explore the dynamics of seeing and being seen, of visual control and visual discipline, in at least two different ways: either by producing video images ex novo through video cameras located inside installations conceived as spaces of surveillance, or by discovering and re-editing non-artistic surveillance images treated as found footage material in order to investigate their aesthetic potential and their social and political meaning.

Video Installations as Surveillance Devices

To the first group described just above belongs a series of works realized between the end of the 1960s and the mid 1970s by artists who explored the act of
surveillance within the context of a wider interest in the relationship between artwork and spectator. Rejecting the modernist aesthetics described and prescribed by critics such as Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg, artists such as Michael Snow, Bruce Nauman, and Dan Graham emphasized the confrontation between the artwork and the body of the spectator, the duration and the unpredictability of the spectatorial experience, the incompleteness and the opacity of a seeing which could be mediated in a variety of forms.

What is of particular interest for us in the context of this reflection on intermediality, is the attitude of these artists towards the medium-specificity of video. In the works we will now analyze, such a medium is employed both for its specificity and for its flexibility.

On the one hand, these works use video as a medium whose essential characteristics define it as particularly indicated for any form of visual surveillance. One of such characteristics is the possibility of seeing as live feedback the images captured by a closed-circuit camera, as well as that of dislocating in different spaces the video camera and the monitor on which its images are transmitted, thus establishing situations in which someone is seen without knowing the source of such seeing; the capacity of ‘covering’ a given space entirely through an accurate positioning of the video camera which reduces to the minimum the space that remains offscreen; finally, the possibility of recording long, continuous takes without any interruption in the temporal flow. All these possibilities that are specific to video, and that in the case of live feedback differentiate it altogether from cinema, explain why critics such as Anne-Marie Duguet have suggested that the principle of surveillance is somehow intrinsic, or constitutive, of the video image (cf. Duguet 1988, 229–230, and Parfait 2001, 247–288).

On the other hand, in all these works video is employed as a highly flexible medium which can be deployed in a wide variety of spatial configurations, thanks to the mobility and the lightness of the video cameras, as well as to the various forms and positions that the monitors can take. If we consider that in a video installation the ‘medium’ is not only the video device but also its specific spatial arrangement, we have to recognize that what we consider as ‘medium’ is here something extremely fluid and flexible, since the spatial arrangements exhibited by the installations we will now consider are very different from one another.

The video installation by Michael Snow entitled De La (1969–1972) [Fig. 4.] stages the optical device that the artist had previously employed in a work entitled La Région centrale (1969–1970) [Fig. 5]: a video camera installed on a mobile
mechanical arm which, by moving continuously in space along a series of ever-
changing trajectories, allows it to record without interruption the surrounding
space. In La Région centrale the videocamera, located in the midst of the
wilderness of a mountain landscape in Québec, explored such a panorama in all
directions, offering the spectator a panoptic but labyrinthic visual experience
which was totally disorienting, up to the point of causing altogether the loss of
one’s own sense of location in space. In De La, such a kinetic video-sculpture is
instead presented in the interior space of an art gallery and mounted on a circular
platform surrounded by four monitors which transmits in real time the images
captured by the video camera. The panoptic exploration of the inner space of the
gallery becomes here particularly puzzling once the camera eventually captures
the images shown on one of the monitors, showing a monitor in a monitor in a
monitor... ad infinitum: a sudden moment of feedback which gives place to a
short but vertiginous mise en abyme.

In Live/Taped Video Corridor (1969–1970) Bruce Nauman uses the contrast
between frame stop and live feedback in order to induce a moment of
estrangement in the spectator who enters the installation, a long and narrow
corridor (10 meters long, 50 centimetres wide) with a video camera high above
the entrance and two monitors, one on top of the other, at the end. [Fig. 6.] The
higher monitor shows a static image of the empty corridor, while in the lower
monitor the spectator sees the images recorded by the video camera located at the
entrance high behind his or her shoulders. As long as the spectator advances
through the corridor towards the monitor at the end, he moves farther and farther
away from the video camera, and therefore the image that appears on the higher
monitor is that of his body seen from behind, moving away and becoming smaller
and smaller: rather than coming closer to one’s own image becoming larger and
larger as it would happen when approaching a mirror, the movement of the
spectator towards the monitor sets him farther and farther away from his own
image, which recedes more and more in space. Instead of a process of gradual
recognition of oneself in the monitor we have here an experience of dissociation,
a losing of one’s own image which seems to be slipping away.

In Video Surveillance Piece: Public Room, Private Room (1969–1970) this act of
expropriation of the spectator’s own image is represented through a different
spatial disposition of monitors and video cameras [Fig. 7]. We now have two rooms
located next to each other, in both of which there is a video camera and a monitor.
The first, “public” room is open to the visitors, while the second “private” one is
closed. In the first room there is a video camera which sends its images to the
monitor located on the floor of the second room. The images recorded by the video camera in this second “private” room are in turn sent to the monitor located in the first “public” one. The result is that the spectator sees in the monitor of the public room a view from above of the monitor located in the second inaccessible room, on which appears the image of his or her body seen from behind and standing in front of the monitor of the public room. Just as in *Live/Taped Video Corridor*, the eeriness of feeling oneself seen from behind is multiplied by the fact that one’s own image becomes unreachable, while as in *De La* by Michael Snow the live feedback produces a highly disorienting effect of *mise en abyme*.

Between 1974 and 1976 Dan Graham realized a series of video installations in which the relationship between the spectator and his or her own image recorded by a video camera and diffused by a monitor was explored in all its complexity with the aid not only of live feedback and the different spatial dispositions of video cameras and monitors encountered in the installations previously analyzed, but also of a number of different strategies which included the juxtaposition of monitor and mirrors and the use of time delay. While in Michael Snow’s and Bruce Nauman’s installation the feedback images on the monitors were always transmitted live, Dan Graham introduced often in his video installations a disorienting temporal delay of a few seconds between the moment of recording and the moment of the appearance of the images on the screen. As an emblematic example of such video installations conceived as a series of variations using the same elements and accompanied by an articulated theoretical reflection on the specificities of the video image in comparison with the cinematographic and the mirror image (cf. Graham 1999),

image of himself, 8 seconds ago, and what was reflected on the mirror from the
monitor, 8 seconds ago of himself which is 16 seconds in the past (as the camera
view of 8 seconds prior was playing back on the monitor 8 seconds ago, and this
was reflected on the mirror along with the then present reflection of the viewer).
An infinite regress of time continuums within time continuums (always separated
by 8 seconds intervals) is created. The mirror at right-angles to the other mirror-
wall and to the monitor-wall gives a present-time view of the installation as if
observed from an ‘objective’ vantage point exterior to the viewer’s subjective
experience and to the mechanism which produces the piece’s perceptual effect.
It simply reflects (statically) present time” (Graham 1999, 39–40).

Taken all together, all these video installations have in common the idea of
working on the aesthetic and psychological dimensions of the surveillant gaze
trough a series of variable spatial and visual devices. As we said before, video is
here employed both as a medium whose specificity seems to be intrinsically
intertwined with the act of surveillance, and as an extremely flexible medium
which can be articulated in space in different ways. The common aim of all these
works is to introduce a dimension of estrangement in the spectator’s experience,
an uncanny disturbance in one’s own sense of being in space, through a device in
which one’s own image is either taken away or rendered unreachable, frustrating
our need for self-recognition.

**Surveillance Images as Found Footage**

The second group of artists we will now consider works on the theme of
surveillance in an entirely different way from the artists just examined. In works
such as *The Giant (Der Riese, 1983)* by Michael Klier, *I Love You All (Aus Liebe
t zum Volk, 2004)* by Eyal Sivan, *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts (Ich glaubte
Gefangene zu sehen, 2000)* and *Counter-Music (Gegen-Musik, 2004)* by Harun
Farocki, the images of surveillance are not generated live by video devices
spatially arranged by the artists, but rather taken as found footage material from
the innumerable video cameras which are scattered through a variety of public
and private spaces. Recorded continuously by video cameras that are specifically
positioned in order to frame in the most effective way the area they are supposed
to cover, such images constitute an endless reserve of mostly anonymous and
useless visual material which the artists reveal and explore in order to investigate
the effects of their social presence, their political meaning, as well as their hidden
narrative and fictional potential.
The Giant by Michael Klier begins by showing us the images of an airplane landing at Berlin Tegel airport shot by a video camera located on the air traffic control tower. The Wagner soundtrack seems to reveal a distant, ironic quotation of the beginning of Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will (Triumph des Willens, 1935), and introduces the first of a series of disorienting juxtapositions between such anonymous images and clearly ‘authorial’ soundtracks spanning from Romantic classical music to jazz. The following sequences show us images of the streets of Hamburg and Berlin seen from above, a control room full of monitors, a sailing boat on a lake followed by the jerky mechanical movements of a surveillance video camera, a gas station, a striptease bar, a railway station, a beach, and so on. Among this seemingly endless series of anonymous images we capture here and there some short sequences which seem to possess a certain narrative potential, as if they were disperse fragments of all the infinite stories that unfold themselves daily within the space of the city: a sick man taken away by an ambulance; a girl playing with a frisbee in the garden of a luxurious villa while soon after a fancy car enters the gate; a young man caught while stealing in a department store, and the voice of the employee who is alerting the guards at the entrance; a man pushing a woman violently into the service door of a supermarket, in front of the perplexed faces of the people near by… While watching this movie made exclusively by editing found footage surveillance images which appear to be all characterized by the same formal traits – static or mechanically moving shots always taken from above, black and white, low quality – what we feel is the constant need to find some sense in what we are seeing: to discover the stories hiding behind such anonymity and meaninglessness, behind such seemingly unintentional editing, considering Klier’s film as a sort of postmodern “symphony of the city” entirely composed of surveillance images.

The case of I Love You All [Fig. 9] by the Israeli film director Eyal Sivan is entirely different. If the source of the images seen in The Giant was uncertain, here there can be no doubt: all the images we see are the product of the all-pervasive system of social control that had been put into practice by the Stasi, the infamous Secret Police of the former East Germany, the DDR. Having had access to such an immense visual archive, Sivan selects and re-edits them with the voice over of a narrator who knows them well: Mayor S., a former Stasi official, who tells us about his experience in 1990, just after the fall of the Socialist regime. What is at stake in I Love You All is not the temptation of unveiling the fictional potential hiding among apparently ordinary and anonymous images, but rather the possibility of understanding the all-pervasive presence of a systematic apparatus of control and
discipline which aimed at rendering the social space perfectly transparent and
disciplined, abolishing any distinction between the public and the private
dimension, and considering any citizen as a potential suspect.

The same strategy employed by Sivan in order to analyze the archival Stasi
surveillance images is adopted by Harun Farocki in order to examine an even
more elusive apparatus, since it is still functioning and can be detected throughout
societies which are considered as fully democratic: that vast system of visual
control constituted by hundreds of thousands of video cameras which are
increasingly deployed in order to control the social space in its entirety. In I
Thought I Was Seeing Convicts we see images captured by the video cameras in
charge of monitoring the movements and behaviours of the clients in a
supermarket, a surveillance system which, as Farocki clearly shows us, is very
similar to the one used to control the inmates in a prison. In Counter-Music [Fig.
10] we see instead the various forms of visual surveillance that are functioning in
the French city of Lille, from the control of the railway traffic to the observation
of the crowds in the streets and squares of the city. Through a complex editing
which mixes found footage images of various provenience, and in which the ones
that seem to dominate are the ones that Farocki calls “operational images” –
images generated automatically and connected to the functioning of some system
or device – we are confronted with the existence of an iconic universe of which
we were almost entirely unaware: an array of images without spectators (cf.
Bredekamp, Bruhn, and Werner 2007) which permeate all the levels of our daily
life, scanning in all directions the spaces in which we live, and de facto producing
a regime of visual control that is not so far from the one that had been dreamt by
the totalitarian regimes of the past, although much more polycentric and complex.

Working not so much on the creation of new spaces of video surveillance but
on the discovery and the détournement of pre-existing images, often totally
anonymous and doomed to disappear in some remote visual archive, Michael
Klier, Eyal Sivan and Harun Farocki show us the various and often unexpected
medial forms in which the principle of surveillance manifests itself throughout
the social space. Their objective as artists – especially in the case of Harun
Farocki, whose work is entirely dedicated to this aim – is that of using the
epistemic power of montage in order to contribute to a critical analysis of one of
the hidden dimensions of contemporary visual culture. As artists-iconologists
who explore the most remote regions of our iconosphere, they use montage to
reveal the potential and the threat posed by this vast array of surveillance images
which more and more permeate our society.
Transmedial Migrations

Performance and photography, video installations and the editing of found footage images: taken all together, the various works we have encountered in the previous pages – from the street performance of Following Piece by Vito Acconci to the complex montage of the films and installations of Harun Farocki – present us with a partial but meaningful cross-section of the diversity of media through which contemporary art and cinema have explored the surveillant gaze in all its seductiveness, its disciplinary function, its social presence, and its political dangers.

What strikes us at the end of this itinerary is on the one hand the great flexibility with which different generations of artists have worked with different media and different devices in order to establish a relationship of surveillance between those who see and those who are seen, as if such objective had a clear primacy over the different medial forms in which it has been articulated. Vito Acconci and Sophie Calle investigate surveillance through performance, photography and text. Michael Snow, Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham take as their starting point the medium specificity of video, especially the live feedback, but at the same time they use the closed-circuit video cameras and monitors within spatial configurations that are constantly changing, and in which the video image is integrated with the mediation provided by the spatial disposition of architectural elements specifically designed for the occasion (corridors, rooms) and is often juxtaposed with other types of images, for example those produced my mirrors.

On the other hand, working with the same operation consisting in the editing of previously gathered found footage images, Michael Klier, Eyal Sivan and Harun Farocki unveil the great variety of surveillance devices that are invisibly scattered in the social space, both that of a totalitarian regime which aimed at the most pervasive forms of control over the lives of its citizens, and that of societies in which individual freedom and privacy are listed, at least nominally, among the core values to be defended.

What emerges from the analysis of all these different works taken together is the possibility of considering visual surveillance as a scopic form which has the capacity of ‘migrating’ not only across media – an expression which seems to imply a distinction between media as clearly defined and separate entities – but also reinventing media: maintaining some of its characteristic features but at the same time rearranging them in ever changing medial forms. We may call this
migration ‘transmedial’ (cf. Schroeter 1998, 136ff.), only if we emphasize the prefix *trans-* in a scopic form, visual surveillance, which never ends to transform and transcend the medial configurations in which it manifests itself, both in the artistic and in the social domain.

**References**


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Figure 8. Dan Graham, *Present Continuous Past(s)* (1974).