



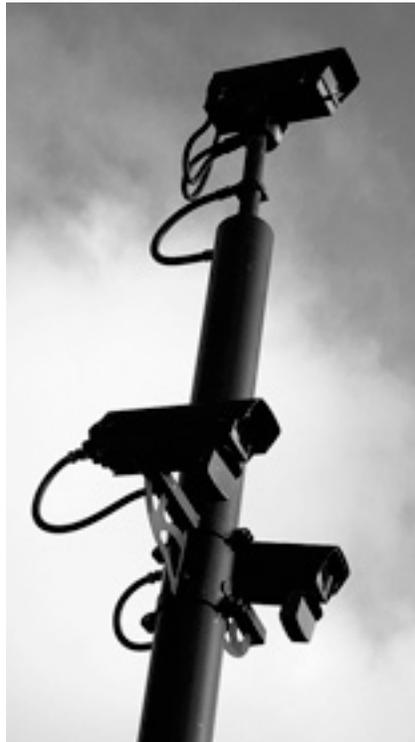
CCTV, Palace of Justice, Bilbao, Spain 2007 © John Perivolaris

How Safe Do You Feel?: Surveillance and Photographers

by John Perivolaris

On the streets of cities in the United States and Europe we are witnessing a dramatic proliferation of surveillance cameras trained on citizens' every move through increasingly privatised public spaces. For example, the average Londoner is daily caught on camera 300 times. But, while the citizen is constantly watched, they are increasingly restricted from photographing those same spaces. In London, the capital city with possibly the world's highest concentration of CCTV cameras, it is unlikely that one will not be approached by security guards, police, or plain clothes officers if

one attempts, as I often do, to photograph almost any building, but particularly corporate offices in the City or Canary Wharf. This is also true if one attempts to do the same in the vicinity of residential areas housing the transnational rich, whose most high-profile representatives are the Russian oligarchs of Kensington, Holland Park, Knightsbridge, Mayfair, Belgravia, and Chelsea. Often justified as an anti-terrorist measure, intrusive surveillance and its attendant restrictions often merely serve corporate security or that of the rich, in a displacement of the public realm by capital.



CCTV Cameras, Borough High Street,
London SE1 2007
© John Perivolaris



CCTV, Smithfield,
London, England 2007 © John Perivolaris



CCTV, Whitehall,
London 2007 © John Perivolaris

London's photographers are not alone. The photographer and journalist Bill Adler reports that a ban on photography in the downtown area of Silver Spring, Maryland, is being strictly enforced. However, he observes that the restrictions being imposed in a public space by the police and security guards there are not supported by law.

Photography proves an easy target in a current climate of hysteria fuelled not only by the fear of terrorism but also what the journalist Mike Hume has termed 'the mood of irrational paedophile-phobia that grips our culture'.

In response, there has been widespread anger among photographers and campaigners. In a pre-emptive move, the British photographer Simon Taylor started a petition on the Downing Street website which, between 14 February and 13 July 2007 attracted 68,300 signatures. These supported Taylor's call on the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to resist the temptation to grant legal status to de-facto 'restrictions regarding photography in public places'. The petition added that: 'It is a fundamental right of a UK citizen to use a camera in a public place'.

At the same time, the New York Times has reported on the public outcry that has lead city officials to redraft a proposal that would have obliged photographers, film- or video-makers there to obtain permits and liability insurance of \$1 million.

These actions draw attention to the fact that citizens are swiftly being transformed into suspects. This should be of universal concern beyond the photographic community. For example, the British government is currently determined to enact legislation that would enable it to issue its citizens with ID cards. These would carry all the holder's personal information and would have to be carried at all times and presented to the authorities when requested, with no grounds for such a request having to be asserted. This would mark a reversal of the democratic principle of the state's answerability to its citizens, with surveillance acting to inflate the currency of fear and paranoia on which Western governments, particularly in the US and UK, now trade in exchange for their citizens' acquiescence to the ever-narrowing restriction of their civil rights.

How might photographers, artists, activists, along with their fellow citizens, further respond to the plethora of undemocratic restrictions to which they are now subjected in the name of security? Is the right to watch

swiftly becoming a monopoly of the state? Is democratic citizenship also now a struggle for the right to see as well as to be seen? Who now has the right to record individuals' and groups' experiences of public spaces?



CCTV elevator, Bentinck Court Apartments, Sneinton, Nottingham, England 2008 © John Perivolaris

One perversely subversive deconstruction of the state of surveillance is that of the artist Hasan Elahi, who was mistakenly detained at Detroit airport in 2002 on suspicion of being a terrorist. Repeatedly interrogated by the FBI, Elahi not only proved his innocence by using online records to trace his movements but decided to make his entire life an open blog. Elahi continues to prove his innocence with each of about a hundred photographs he daily posts to his website and thus forestalls his possible disappearance to Guantánamo through total visibility. Elahi is effectively overloading the surveillance systems to which he is subjected by continuously GPS live-tracking his location online through a cellphone hacked anklet, photographing, and providing textual data of the most trivial details of his daily life online 24 hours a day. The resulting information overload 'floods the market', in his words, and devalues the intelligence held on him by the authorities through an exhaustive process of self-surveillance.



'24 hour CCTV in operation',
Morrisons Supermarket, Nottingham, England 2007
© John Perivolaris

Elahi's response might be associated with the idea of the 'Transparent Society' developed by the author David Brin in his 1998 book of the same title. Seeing the loss of privacy as an inevitable result of the digital age, Brin believes that the only way of restraining the authoritarian deployment of surveillance is by embracing surveillance and making it openly available to all. In this way, according to Brin, the accountability of surveillance is ensured.

The subversiveness of the transparent life Elahi has adopted also aligns him to a certain extent with the concept of sousveillance, of which there are several noteworthy proponents. The term refers to actions that imply a process whereby surveillance is placed under reverse scrutiny. This is achieved by ironically mirroring its technologies and strategies of looking from the point of view of the citizen under surveillance. The aim of sousveillance interventions is to make visible the power relations inherent in contemporary surveillance society by temporarily turning them upside-down: surveillance, from above, is translated into sousveillance, from below. The communal online presence and democratic accessibility of grass-roots sousveillance interventions, might counter surveillance's

authoritarian corrosion of a sense of community in a climate of suspicion. Sousveillance would reconstruct the secretive centralised authority of surveillance as a distributed power structure that aims to strike a state of equeveillance through its inherent accountability and egalitarianism. Equeveillance ideally implies a democracy where citizen and state have equal access to the means of watching in and watching over public space. How might this be achieved to our benefit?

An international coalition of activists from the arts, sciences, and technology, including Sousveillance.org have declared the 24th of December, World Sousveillance Day or Shoot Back Day. Since 2001 they have used their own cameras to 'shoot back' at surveillance cameras in public spaces on the busiest shopping day of the year, when the highest numbers are probably under surveillance. Inevitably, they also record their encounters with security guards who attempt to stop them.

The inspiration for these interventions is Steve Mann, one of the sousveillance movement's most influential figures. Having coined the term sousveillance, Mann is a pioneer of the cyborglogging or glogging technologies deployed by Elahi, whereby the web-posting of data, whether visual or other, is an autonomous process that does not need to be consciously triggered by the user. ([Cyborglogs "glogs"](#)).

Mann's current research at the University of Toronto involves the development of wearable webcam and webcasting equipment and software that allows the user to glog 24 hours a day. Mann has experimented netcasting his life by wearing a webcam-enabled helmet and has focused his attention on surveillance environments and those who enforce the authority of surveillance, such as security guards and even shop employees, who oppose his choice to turn his camera on them. As Professor Ronald Deibert, also of the University of Toronto, has observed, the result of such a reversal is that 'they lose their anonymous power of surveillance, and it makes them feel vulnerable'. ([Record the ens That Records You](#)). Mann's suggestion for the 2002 World Sousveillance Day, as reported by *Wired.com* (ibid.) underlined its subversive rationale:

Affix a dark acrylic rectangle to the front of a sweatshirt, with the following words clearly visible: "For your protection, a video record of you and your establishment may be transmitted and recorded at remote locations. ALL CRIMINAL ACTS PROSECUTED." Mann likens this device, which he calls a

MaybeCam to Schrödinger's Cat: maybe it is a camera, maybe it isn't, but its very existence changes the behaviour of the people nearby.



Similarly, Mann and other activists have further experimented with wearing fake security MaybeCams modelled on those used in casinos and department stores.

In [*Cyberglogging with camera phones: steps towards equiveillance*](#), Mann and his co-writers point out that, though it is tempting to view the relationship between surveillance and sousveillance 'as binary, us-versus-them opposites, [but] we are hoping to build a system of equiveillance, that is, the possibility that these two very different social practices might somehow result in some kind of equilibrium' (p. 178). In parallel to Brin's thoughts, they conclude that 'one of the virtues of equiveillance is an increased reciprocal transparency in the operations of powerful entities engaged in surveillance' (p. 179).

It is perhaps in the spirit of equiveillance that I would ask you, dear citizens and photographers, how safe do you feel under surveillance? Your response might be one small step towards reclaiming public space through debate. The resulting dialogue is necessary to ensure democratic freedoms and to

counter the imposition of government policy from above based on hitherto non-transparent fear-mongering.

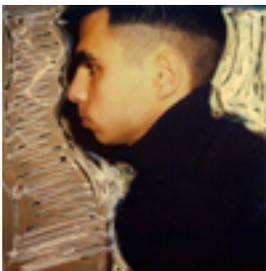


John Perivolaris

[*john.perivolaris@ntlworld.com*](mailto:john.perivolaris@ntlworld.com)

March, 2008

**



John Perivolaris is an independent documentarian and fine art photographer. He is currently working on a project entitled *Left Luggage*, which explores migrant identities. Between 2005 and 2007 he was the Board Chairman of *LOOK 07* and co-organiser, with Julian Tait, of The Democratic Image Symposium. Perivolaris is the administrator of the flickr '*Surveillance Mirror*' group, to which readers are invited to contribute.