Stanza: An artist's engagement with surveillance, privacy, technology and control

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I write about surveillance, privacy and technologies of security. Most frequently this is from a political perspective, engaged with issues of power, but also particularly with issues of representation – how are these technologies and the social practices facilitated by them represented in thought and in language? To what problems are these technologies presented as an answer? And what type of political climate is it that doesn't simply justify their use, but actively seems to mandate it. Often this is political language – the language of policy documents and speeches as well as the procedural documents which pass thought-made-technical through the assemblages of organisations, actors and technologies that make up contemporary society. However it also reaches out to the broader culture of surveillance.[2] This also means paying attention to those representations of surveillance and security technology that counter or complicate these narratives of control and management. This makes the netart, data sculptures and networked space artwork of the UK artist Stanza of particular interest as it explicitly and actively engages with surveillance, privacy, technology and control.

This essay takes a theoretically guided walk through Stanza's various body of work, including both recent and older pieces, supported by my own engagement with the growing body of surveillance theory. Particular themes to be explored include time, space and landscape, ambiguity of meaning, and counter-mapping. For the surveillance studies audience, I hope to pull out some of the tensions involved in the examination of surveillance art and for the general audience, to consider Stanza's work against this context.

Surveillance

Surveillance is a key feature of modernity. Surveillance "involves the collection and analysis of information about populations in order to govern their activities."[3] If *governance* is understood as including a wide range of social practices of management, administration, and coordination then it becomes apparent that *surveillance* is not solely limited to policing and intelligence, but rather is an organising principle found in many areas of life; including commerce, education, healthcare, insurance, and entertainment. Surveillance is a combination of knowledge and intervention. Any social process which functions through the gathering and processing of information can therefore be understood as having a surveillant dimension. Whilst many of these processes are functional, useful, and even desired and enjoyable[4], they can also be part of profoundly exclusionary politics. Surveillance is linked to power, and is therefore fundamentally a political question. Understood in this way, it is clear that surveillance is not a new phenomenon. However the development of contemporary information technologies has brought about a multiplication and acceleration of forms of surveillance, and at the same time brought this practice to greater levels of cultural salience and public awareness. Although not always well understood, surveillance has caught the public mood in recent years.

Stanza writes “the patterns we make, the forces we weave, are all being networked into retrievable data structures that can be re-imagined and sourced for information. These patterns all disclose new ways of seeing the world.”[5]

In parallel with multiplication, acceleration and public attention, the phenomena of surveillance has attracted the attention of scholars and thinkers from a wide range of academic disciplines, leading to the development of *surveillance studies*, an eclectic multi-disciplinary field strongly influenced by sociology, criminology, political and legal studies as well as geography, history, computer science and ethics. The field has established journals such as *Surveillance and Society*[6], and a number of research centres around the world. Questions that drive surveillance studies include the impacts of surveillance on surveilled populations, the different forms that surveillance takes in different cultures and different contexts, the spread of surveillance, its history, its politics, as well as the aforementioned questions of the cultures of surveillance.

Surveillance art

The field of surveillance studies has practiced an engagement with the world of what might be called “surveillance art” (although we will return to the suitability of this terminology in later sections of this paper).[7] *Surveillance and Society* has an ongoing remit to publish accounts of artistic work alongside its more conventional academic papers[8] and in 2010 devoted an entire special issue to the topic of Surveillance, Performance and New Media Art.[9] Whilst artists such as Jordan Crandall and Manu Luksch have spoken at surveillance studies network conferences and workshops, and a number of writers have engaged with the subject.

By any measure, Stanza’s work takes it rightful place in this field. His work engages with the “sophisticated real time panopticon” of the Internet of Things and big data that he calls “the mother of big brother”. His works are combinations of technology and visuals that prominently feature CCTV, sensors, data(mining), and tracking, as well as urbanism, a key concern of many of the geographers in surveillance studies. Maria Chatzichristodolou states that Stanza’s work is “Questioning the way technology is used to log and control people’s movements” and is “warning against the ubiquity of technology within modern cities.”[10] In an earlier article, published in *Surveillance and Society*, we argued that surveillance art, or at least, the surveillance art that had come of the attention of surveillance studies, was often limited to focusing upon the portrayal of the surveillance of the human body in space. We were concerned that these accounts were often not sensitive enough to the way that contemporary surveillance practices, and particularly some of the most socially important ones, are often to do with the collection and processing of data, rather than images.[11] This is what Roger Clarke has termed “dataveillance”.[12] We examined a small number of artists and works that engage with what we termed ‘invisible surveillance’ and are glad to include Stanza within that field. His work is very much about data, and data flows, in particular those flowing from and through the city.

It is however, worth reflecting upon the nature of any such interaction, such an attempt to cross disciplinary boundaries in search of new knowledge. In that same article we expressed our concern that surveillance studies had been somewhat over-eager and occasionally unreflective in its engagement with artistic representations of surveillance. On our part there is certainly an attraction,

a desire to add something to scholarly accounts. Surveillance studies has a clear desire to bring artistic production within its ambit. In part this is because of the legitimate concern for culture, context and representation. However there is also a different form of credibility on offer in the artistic sensibility, and a desire to step outside of the text as a primary means of communication. Surveillance studies has a concern for communication and dissemination, and a politically motivated desire for public awareness. We have an awareness that our academic papers are read in small numbers and that our formal methods of communication might be systematically hobbled. Perhaps "surveillance art" (alongside other cultural representations of surveillance in films, movies and music) offers another way of expressing concerns or of communicating new ways of perceiving and understanding surveillance. For example, Dietmar Kammerer argues that

"scholars of cultural sciences could examine the constitutive role of fiction and imagination in security discourse. This way of thinking about the "cultures of surveillance" can criticize and counterbalance the alleged "rationality" of the security and surveillance dispositive as well as expose the techno-fetishism that dominates much of the debate"[13]

This raises a concern regarding the potentially utilitarian approach to surveillance art and what we might ask from it. A reflection on Stanza's body of work in this area starts to provide us with some answers.

Time

Stanza has been engaged in constant work on these topics through a thirty year period of change and development. This therefore allows us to consider changes in his work over time, and place these against developments in the subjects of his work. Surveillance has not stood still during this period, and its changes can be traced, if sometimes indirectly, through Stanza's own development. Stanza's work spans a period which John McGrath describes as including a shift in public attitudes to surveillance. McGrath describes this "transformation from deep-seated fear of surveillance, to a largely apathetic acceptance, to an apparent ecstasy of engagement".[14] McGrath's argument is that this shift is less one of government positions and policies, or even of technology itself, but rather of cultural practice.

Stanza's earlier work fits within a broader field of video and CCTV art [15], such as that brought together by Thomas Levin, Ursula Frohne and Peter Weibel in CTRL [SPACE]. Works such as *History is personal* and *A world of endless possibilities* repurposed CCTV and webcams. More recent works have demonstrated a clear shift away from this aesthetic towards the active construction of sensor networks, and exhibit more of an interest in data than images, of real time systems of constant flow and change. CCTV was, for a time, the paradigmatic technology of surveillance, particularly in the United Kingdom. Debates revolved around the loss of privacy in public space, and CCTV imagery became widely spread across cultural representations of surveillance. Urban webcams became popular in this period, as part of projects of public branding and civic identity. On the side of surveillance studies there were many studies of the way that CCTV operators worked, or how people in space responded to the presence of the cameras. In a world of smart cities and linked big-data, the focus upon CCTV, both in art and in surveillance studies seems somewhat quaint. The shifts in Stanza's work are in response to his belief that the problem has morphed with the developing technologies and the powers and possibilities of big data. He believes that tensions created by such technologies have actually increased. The shift in the direction of data is driven by a desire to

understand and explore these flows, and to find other systems that could offer open ended space for agency to take place.

Looking at Stanza's work chronologically, against this background of shifts in both technology and the popular reception of surveillance allows us to realise that Stanza's individual works are so of their moment, that they perhaps hide some of the history of the subjects with which they engage. The surveillant desire to make the city knowable, visible and open to governmental intervention has a long pedigree that predates our current technology. Patrick Joyce has written about the way that paper maps and surveys of Victorian Manchester and other cities were also a technology of government.[16] The similarities are not absent however. The paintings in Stanza's *Control* series, *City of Dreams*, and *Matrixity* evoke the historic maps of Manchester and other Victorian cities that Joyce uses to illustrate his book on urban governmentality.

Stanza's work carries the legacy of the technologies that he repurposes as his medium. Might we then anticipate a future shift towards the cleaner aesthetic of contemporary surveillance and technology? A relatively consistent part of Stanza's imagery, especially in pieces such as *The Emergent City*, has been the exposure of circuitry and electronics, the obvious evidence that something technological is occurring. The artworks have the air of prototype, a jaggedness and kit-built appearance reminiscent of an electronics work bench, or on the other hand, the "greeble" on Star Destroyer – irregular shapes providing a sense of scale and complexity. The current aesthetic of surveillant technologies is moving away from such an unfinished, work-in-progress, to a world of contained (unopenable) white plastic, with smooth angles and glossy screens. The contemporary Internet-of-things appears not as a creature of wires and cables, but rather a glossy set of images with substantial amounts of white-space. Echoing Stanza's terminology of the "mother of big brother", Mother from Sen.se is a paradigmatic example of such a technology[17]: A smooth white, bowling-pin of a networked sensor system. So much work is being done here to deny the technology and the circuitry. Stanza's most recent piece hints at moves in this direction, despite the tangle of wires, *The Agency at the End of Civilisation* is noticeably *smoother*, than Stanza's older work. The extent to which this is an aesthetic choice, or simply a result of the technology that Stanza is required to adapt and modify in the creation of his art remains an open question. If the latter, it highlights the extent to which technology-related art is, even when reworked and intentionally subversive, dependent upon existing technological directions, often commercial, but also occasionally military. Things shape what can be done with them, even if they do not determine it

Space

Despite an orientation towards data, Stanza's work is inherently tied up with the representation of space, and in particular of urban space. Earlier works such as *Urban Generation* exhibited thematic interest in the city that would later be explicitly related in form in works such as *The Emergent City. A life from complexity to City of Bit.*[18] *And Capacities: Life in the emergent city*[19]. Some of Stanza's most striking works take the form of miniature cities. According to Stanza:

"Cities offer the opportunity for unique types of data gathering experiences via a variety of sources. With this perspective there are many unimagined threads of data and connections that describe our world that can be explored through wireless mobile networks, within which we can create new artistic interpretations."[20]

In choosing to simulate and explore the environment being surveilled, rather than focusing upon the individual (apart from occasional works such Body 01000010011011110110010001111001) Stanza moves in the direction of dataveillance, and avoids the trap of focusing solely upon the physical body of the human being in space. Much surveillance that gets media, cultural or political attention is surveillance of the individual. We have a (potentially damaged) traditional of individual rights, and privacy is generally considered to be something possessed by and protecting individuals. Narratives of surveillance often focus upon the harms to or impacts upon specific named individuals, rather than upon the reformulation of environments as a whole.

Taking this further, we believe it allows us to situate Stanza within a broader historical tradition of landscape art. This posits the question for surveillance scholars attempt to use surveillance art – to what extent is it reductive, or even colonial, to label such art as "surveillance art" when it might be more accurately be considered contemporary landscape art. Surveillance becomes epiphenomenal to the extent that if one is to accurately capture, or meaningfully interpret the modern urban landscape, one simply must include surveillance and information flows if one is not to leave out half of the picture. The urban environment includes invisible data flows. Landscape art is not just the admiration of the natural,[21] and the tradition has long since broadened from the agricultural to the modern and post-modern city.

Landscape is political, although the particular politics can often be in tension. Does landscape tend to obscure relations of production and forces that have shaped the environment, including power and conflict? Or does it offer an emancipatory potential, carrying an alternative way of seeing? Stephen Daniels is cautious about the claims to power of landscape art, acknowledging that if it has a power, it is a subtle, passive one, but that one that does play a role in setting the scene for further decisions and political acts.[22] Martin Warnke argues that the actual physical landscape is the result of political decisions by authorities over time, [23] and this is certainly true in the case of the contemporary urban environment.

James Corner is more optimistic regarding the potential of landscape art. He believes that "landscape has the capacity to critically engage with metaphysical and political programmes that operate in a given society". It plays an important role in negotiating the relationship between the imaginary and the built. Corner quotes Augustin Bergue in saying that landscape is the sensible aspect of the relationship between a society and space, as well as noting the potential for landscape to assist in appreciating how today's space and time are phenomena radically different from their historical antecedents.[24]

"Capacities: A-Life In The Emergent City", can therefore be understood as real-time, urban landscape art, making urban data flows, already an inherent part of the urban environment an explicit part of the artwork, and bringing them to the attention of the viewer as part of a new urban sensibility. Stanza argues in this direction in several places:

"we need to imagine the city at a different scale. The possibility is to extend our imagination and enable that perception of the city as a dynamic network. We can now put systems in place that can re-employ our perception and thus create new understanding of how this behaviour unfolds. There are patterns, they are connected and the systems that evolve, can be simulated and acted upon." [25]

Ambiguity

It is difficult for a particular type of political scientist to make the methodological and theoretical assumptions required to make clear claims about what a piece of art suggests or means. I can say what it evokes for me, but then I'm a particular subjectivity. I'm also aware of my own particular sensitivity to surveillance in a way that I concede is not normal (although, with the spread of surveillance, it is perhaps more normal than it once was). Beyond this, making inferences about audiences' understanding and perception is fraught with difficulty even in the prosaic fields of TV news and print journalism.[26] One route to understanding is to look at what the artist has to say about the intent and meaning of their work, although we should remain careful that this is not taken as gospel. Fortunately, Stanza is not afraid to provide conceptual background to his work. He makes artworks that arise from his own research into "control space" and "surveillance space" and issues to do with privacy."[27] There is therefore a set of texts one can access for a deeper understanding. From a reading of these texts, it is possible to identify a productive ambiguity in Stanza's work on surveillance. Ambiguity is interesting because it offers the potential to highlight the politics of knowledge that relates to surveillance, including the frequent asymmetries of information between watchers and watched.

In the textual descriptions of several of Stanza's urban sensor network pieces, and the text associated with them on his website, it is often unclear what data is being collected and what is being done with that data. We know that his sensor networks involve environmental sensors, temperature, pressure etc, but is this all? Might we not wonder if, like the Google Streetview cars that also recorded wi-fi data as they circulated around the roads, there are other sensors in the mix? In the generative artworks, the algorithms and software that take the raw data and convert it into art are hidden from the gallery visitor. This is a deliberate strategy for Stanza who is investigating the malleability of data as a medium and how it can be reformed and remediated. However when Stanza is in control of the networked hardware in his work, then the data collected can be made open source and publicly available. This connects to a central tension of big data, the ownership and control of data flows (including what gets recorded in which contexts, and how are decisions based upon that data enacted), as well as the transparency of systems, and the extent to which an outside observer can understand their processes. The answer to this tension is not necessarily simple transparency as descriptions of systems that rely too much on the technology can also cloud the situation.

A second source of playful, productive ambiguity is at work in Stanza's mock cityscapes. These are composed of hundreds of pieces of electronics, wired together. It is difficult (without a detailed investigation that would not be permitted within a gallery space) to immediately know which of these technological elements are functional, which are functional but redundant, which are potentially functional and may be activated in the future, and which are purely decorative. You can start to imagine further capacities buried in that technology. The possibilities of contemporary data surveillance are that much more complicated that the ambiguous presence or absence of the guard in the central tower of Foucault's panopticon.

Thirdly, researchers on surveillance language have noted in several places that the language of surveillance and security practices is often ambiguous and unclear ("images are being recorded for security purposes" for example).[28] Stanza's most recent work *The Agency at the End of Civilisation*

plays upon this theme. This artwork, previously mentioned, is described as a real time interpretation of data from the Internet of Cars project[29], a project responding to data and research on traffic flow analysis through ANPR (automatic number plate recognition). In an interesting form of access, the artwork claims to draw upon images from one hundred CCTV cameras in the south of England. When driving along the motorway, one is hardly likely to anticipate potentially becoming part of an exhibition in a gallery – more evidence of the capacity for re-articulation and repurpose of all forms of data.

In addition to the ambiguity of what exactly the "future predictive software" stated to run the artwork, the works' emotional content comes from a dislocatory moment, where a familiar narrative of surveillance is shifted in an alternate direction. This challenges the audience to consider the extent to which they believe the claims about how the system operates or not, and the extent to which it may or may not have been manipulated. In combination with CCTV imagery, the computer generated voice of the system announces time-stamped locations of particular vehicles, including identifying the occupant by name. If the system does have access to the data it claims, then this seems plausible, it seems aligned with the known function of ANPR (at least to this viewer). The artwork then continues to make announcements that seem a little more of a stretch for such a system: that the occupant of one car might be considering suicide, that another suffers the increased possibility that lift will pass him by and be meaningless. The viewer is forced to make an assessment about the extent to which such extrapolations are possible from the data that might be gathered in such a system. A now familiar surveillance narrative is subtly ruptured, but also points towards the fantasies of big data. Such an extrapolation is probably not possible now, but might it be in the future? Would we want it to be?

These forms of ambiguity relates closely to contemporary concerns about the politics of Big Data. In their call for a critical data studies (something now inherently implicated in studies of surveillance), Craig Dalton and Jim Thatcher warn that big data technology is never a neutral tool, but one that both shapes and is shaped by a contested cultural landscape. The argue that the myths of big data, quantified self, and smart cities are myths of society more generally. This means that it is important to go beyond an instrumental examination of big data. It is not sufficient to simply ask if these technologies work "better" or "worse" that others, but is it also necessary to ask what types of experiences big data is enabling, and which it is closing off. [30]

Counter-mapping / Opening up

In *Cities Under Siege* geographer Stephen Graham analyses what he calls the New Military Urbanism – the set of militarised surveillance practices and technologies that are honed in "experimental" conditions in the cities of the developing world before being returned to the "homeland". In the final chapter he examines a set of practices he terms "countergeographies". Responding to the failure of academic disciplines such as geography and political science to overcome their own colonial legacies, Graham looks at the ways that artists have experimented with ways of countering these militarised urbanisms in public through various forms of public spectacle, including (re)using the very control technologies otherwise used to create and enforce ubiquitous borders. These include exposure (rending the invisible visible), Juxtaposition (countering binaries that allow surveillance such as domestic/foreign, friend/enemy), appropriation (reverse engineering and finding new uses for military infrastructure), Jamming (undermining the use and ritual of the problematic practices),

satire, and Collaboration (working together with the very populations subject to such surveillance).[31] Might these categories give us further purchase on Stanza's work?

In one clear way, Stanza is not involved in exposure of existing surveillance systems that are in place and functioning, for good or ill. He does not show us the morphology of surveillant assemblages, as much as he hints at their possibility by building their mirror images. His work is much more likely to involve building a new system of sensor networks, and pulling that data into a gallery space as the seed for generative art. There is therefore much more evidence for what Graham terms appropriation, although absent the explicit concern with militarism. One wonders to what extent militarised technology can sit outside of Stanza's work in the future, if the trajectory towards fortress urbanism Graham identifies holds true. Stanza makes use of existing technology which he repurposes and combines with elements he creates himself to present alternative potential uses of control technologies. If one was opposed to all forms of surveillance, then the addition of more sensors to the cityscape might be problematic. If it contributes to counter-mappings then the addition might be distinctly valuable.

As in Joyce's maps of urban Victorian cities, mapping and geographic knowledge have been linked to imperialism, governance, capital accumulation, and exploitative material relationships.[32] The knowledge of the city that arises through contemporary surveillance offers similar coercive potential . Dalton and Thatcher, however, warn us against eschewing 'big data' entirely for its ties to surveillance, capital, and other exploitative power geometries. [33] For them, this forecloses the possibility of making use of Big Data for liberatory, revolutionary purposes. Rather, they suggest the (limited) potential in counter-data (a concept derived from research into counter-mapping and with strong similarities to Grahams concept of counter-geographies). This movement is echoed by Stanza: "Can we use new technologies to imagine a world where we are liberated and empowered, where finally all of the technology becomes more than gimmick and starts to actually work for us or are these technologies going to control us, separate us, divide us, create more borders?"[34]

Conclusions: Surveillance art for surveillance scholars

Stanza and Surveillance studies share a similar set of pre-occupations. Our toolkits for exploring them are different and I hope that this collision between the two is productive. In conclusion to this essay, we return to the question of surveillance art, and by necessity, its politics. I must admit to some frustration. Stanza's work gets the technology, it gets its relation to urban space, it plays with ambiguity in capacities, language and information asymmetries in powerful ways. It offers up some alternative constellations of information systems, and has shifted in interesting directions over time.

Only in an interview does Stanza demonstrates a clear political stance in relation to surveillance:

"We know about the surveillance cultures and the notions of the Panopticon. Too much is being "invested" into this controllable space. There is no doubt in my mind, the there are obvious benefits which are easy to cite. However, such a blanketing of control is a sophisticated red herring. It is too risky for a large population of have-nots. We are better off with no surveillance, and the investment should be made elsewhere."[35]

Maria Chatzichristodolou further points us in this direction, arguing that Stanza's work is "subtly, rather than polemically critical of urbanism and the way digital technology is employed for the surveillance of our every move."[36] And perhaps this is the case. It is important for those of us thinking and writing about surveillance from an academic perspective to be careful that we avoid a form of surveillance disciplinary colonialism. It is very easy to go out into the world of art, or film, music, or other forms of popular culture and plant a surveillance flag on bits of art and culture. There is a danger of an unsophisticated identification of the surveillance that progresses no further than the very act of noting. Look! This piece of art is about surveillance! Perhaps this is a feature of a surveillance studies engagement with artistic practice and material which is still in the data-gathering phase, still seeing the need to build a corpus of surveillance-related art that can, later, with the appropriate theoretical tools, serve some analytic or pedagogical function.

By any measure, Stanza's work would fit within such a corpus. However, it is important to start to build such theoretical tools. Some of this will involve familiar questions, for example, do we use too big a concept "surveillance"? Some of Stanza's work is clearly about information, and technology, and the instantiation of those factors in the urban environment. But is this necessarily what we are getting at with the concept? Are we missing some of the nuance? What if surveillance is epiphenomenal, but fundamentally necessary in contemporary landscape art?

Similarly, we must find a way to think through surveillance as material, in addition to subject. Stanza has called data "the medium of the age" [37], and as we have seen, his work carries the legacy of its technological components within its aesthetic. We will need to think about what happens when the nature of the subject material comes up against purely aesthetic considerations? What separates counter mapping from the aesthetisation of surveillance? Perhaps we are too instrumental in our demand that art represents, informs, educates about surveillance. Perhaps that's our job?

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