

Philosophical Issues in the Art of Stanza

by Graham Harman

The London-based artist Stanza has been exhibiting for over three decades, and has been drawn consistently to themes that are also of interest to present-day continental philosophy. One of his frequent topics is the ubiquitous growth of surveillance technologies, as in the “panopticon” addressed by Michel Foucault¹ but later treated more skeptically by Bruno Latour and Emilie Hermant.² Another of Stanza’s themes is multi-point perspectives, though rather than give this topic the expected relativist spin, he stresses the notion that the varying perspectives amount to *parallel realities*—thereby suggesting that these realities are partly cut off from one another for the same reason that Euclidean parallel lines never make contact. Finally, Stanza’s work frequently employs media that utilize real-time interactions between the artwork and its surrounding environment, in ways that sometimes make it difficult to specify exactly where the boundaries of the artwork lie. Let’s consider each of these themes in turn.

1. Surveillance

The theme of surveillance has been a central concern in the social sciences in recent decades. Much of the credit for this obviously must go to Foucault, due to his well-known passages in *Discipline and Punish* on Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon,” an institution whose inhabitants (prisoners, students, patients, or otherwise) might be watched at any moment from a central observation point. As Foucault puts it: “The Panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power.”³ Though Foucault already gave us the intellectual vocabulary to analyze the modern surveillance state, the situation has

become even more severe since his death in 1984. The ubiquity of security cameras in business and government facilities, the proliferation of smartphones filming even the most ludicrous everyday events, the profusion of webcams on personal computers that open every woman's bedroom to malicious hackers— from all this we sense how Foucauldian surveillance has increased beyond anything that Foucault himself imagined. Nor are we always unwilling victims of such intrusion. There is also the exhibitionism of needless “selfies” posted everywhere on the web, along with the voyeurism of reality television scolded early and effectively by Slavoj Žižek:

What we obtain [today] is the tragi-comic reversal of the Bentham-Orwellian notion of the Panopticon-society in which we are (potentially) “observed always” and have no place to hide from the omnipresent gaze of the Power: today, anxiety seems to arise from the prospect of NOT being exposed to the Other's gaze all the time, so that the subject needs the camera's gaze as a kind of ontological guarantee of his/her being.⁴

If Žižek traces our anxiety over surveillance to inherent flaws in the diamond of the human psyche, Latour and Hermant take a more humorous, even dismissive tack:

Going through the series of sentry posts that led us to the office of Mr. Henry, a member of a hierarchically organized corps of 17,000 people, had we perhaps reached the supreme panopticon, the thousand-eyed peacock, capable of encompassing all of Paris and of justifying the worst restrictions on those—Cain and Abel alike—who know that no tomb is deep enough to hide from the centralizing Napoleonic French state? (PIC 51–52)

How does Stanza himself interpret the surveillance state: as disciplinary oppression, the fulfillment of our innermost fantasy, a failed aspiration worthy of friendly teasing, or as something else entirely? Luckily for us, he has no shortage of works on the theme to help us to examine this question.

Let's begin with *Urban Generation; trying to imagine the world from everyone else's perspective, all at once*. (2002) The artist describes the structure of

this piece as follows: “Urban Generation explores the emotional state of the metropolis and considers a world of universal surveillance. The artwork collects live CCTV feeds from 200 cameras in London in real time and reworks these video streams into multi-layered visual structures.”⁵ There is an apparently deliberate tension between the description of the work and its title. On the one hand, the title seems to celebrate the diversity of perspectives housed in the minds of contemporary urban youth, and thus strikes an optimistic and progressive note. On the other, the accompanying description invokes the rather Foucauldian phrase “universal surveillance” and reminds us of today’s security-obsessed London, which is practically depopulated of unwitnessed events. Though to some extent this ambiguity remains even after we have seen the work for ourselves. The images multiply so numerous that not even a team of Stasi officials could discern whatever subversive deeds might be hidden in these frames. Indeed, the video transmits so much information that it dies as information only to be reborn as sheer kaleidoscopic spectacle, in the sort of reversal that Marshall McLuhan studied so intensively.⁶

Another work described by Stanza as inspired by total surveillance, though more than a decade younger than *Urban Generation*, bears a lengthy title of its own: *The Emergent City. From Complexity to the City of Bits*. (2013) In the artist’s own words: “The project uses environmental monitoring technologies and security based technologies, to question audiences’ experiences of real time events and create visualizations of life as it unfolds.”⁷ Later Stanza seems even more disturbed by the growth of surveillance than he did in 2002, that paranoid year of history that we spent in the dust of the 9/11 attacks. Here he is in 2013:

Imagine walking out the door, and knowing every single action, movement, sound, micro movement, pulse, and thread of information is being tracked, monitored, stored, analyzed, interpreted, and logged. The world we will live in

seems to be a much bigger brother than the Orwellian vision, it is the mother of big brother. 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[?]⁸

Here it seems to me that Stanza underestimates the degree to which the work itself provides the answer to his disturbing question. *The Emergent City* is not the surveillance city, even though Stanza's abstract rendering of London (which looks like a giant circuit board grown out of control) is linked to the real-world London through numerous sensors:

The whole gallery space becomes one large artwork made from real time city information and data. The moving objects, fans, changing lights, motors, noises, that you encounter in the gallery are all responding to changes in temperature, light, pressure, noise, and the sound of the city outside. The aesthetic and feel of the space looks like an electronic city. The city is made of units, grids, repetition, building blocks.⁹

With its punctuated stream of multiple surveillance images, *Urban Generation* was a work about time. *The Emergent City*, by contrast, is a work about space, even if the word "emergence" initially seems to suggest a temporal history. After all, what emergence is really about (whether in philosophy, biology, or chemistry) is the partial independence from one another of parts and wholes. It evokes a synchronic structure of layers, and thereby mimics the real London with its various tunnels, towers, cubicles, and subcultures, all of them potential hiding places from a surveillance eye whose potentially evil wisdom is checked by the flatness of the images it inspects.

Surveillance is again pushed to the breaking point in *Body* 01000010011011110110010001111001. (2012) In Stanza's words: "Body is a sculpture which responds to the emergent properties of the environment in South London where the artist's wireless sensor network is situated. It represents the changing life and

complexity of urban space as a dynamic, kinetic artwork.”¹⁰ Despite this reference to information about South London, every hint of oppressive registration is now gone. Here even more than in the works discussed above, surveillance data is translated into something not quite legible for law enforcement purposes.

A work in the same vein is the more recent *The Agency at the End of Civilisation* (2014), whose title and description retain the sinister overtones of Foucault, but whose execution ventures an implicit parody of the surveillance state. The work, Stanza tells us, is “is a real time interpretation of the data of the Internet of Cars project using the UK car number plate recognition system aligned with real time images from one hundred CCTV cameras in the region of South of England.”¹¹ Images are presented onto more than twenty flat panel screens , while absurdly precise information about the geographical positions of cars is emitted through speakers. All of this equipment is linked together with spaghetti-like wires and filaments.

2. Parallel Realities

But Stanza’s interest in the multiplication of images was never just a matter of surveillance. He has always been fascinated by the co-existence of countless parallel realities as well. Even in *Urban Generation*, the most Foucauldian work in his surprisingly un-Foucauldian *oeuvre*, it was less a matter of some central authority viewing all the images than of the parallel viewpoints represented by the images themselves. We recall the disarmingly candid subtitle of the piece: *trying to imagine the world from everyone else’s perspective, all at once*. If interpreted philosophically, this seems to ally Stanza with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ultra-perspectival ontology. For although a house, for instance, is always viewed from just one angle, “it would be

seen differently from the right bank of the Seine, or from the inside, or again from an airplane: the house itself is none of these appearances... The house itself is not the house viewed from nowhere, but the house viewed from everywhere.”¹² But here the conversation grows sticky. In recent years, the classical tradition of philosophy is often condemned for its search for a “view from nowhere” or “God’s-eye-view” that would sum up the reality of a thing and render all lesser perspectives deficient. It feels satisfying on some level when Merleau-Ponty replaces the view from nowhere with the view from *everywhere*, thereby redeeming all partial perspectives and giving each one some share in a final approach to reality. What seems to escape Merleau-Ponty is that the house cannot be the house viewed from everywhere, because a house is simply not made of views. Rather, the views are all views *of a house*, which itself subsists in a place that is not and cannot be viewed.

What would be Stanza’s position in a hypothetical debate between the perspectivist Merleau-Ponty and a realist who refuses to see a house as built out of millions of views? Whatever Stanza’s conscious standpoint on this question might be, *Urban Generation* is not heavy-handed enough to present its numerous perspectives in the form of a philosophical thesis. The alteration of the images on screen occurs far too quickly and playfully to convince us that the searing red eye of HAL is keeping score for London as a whole. There is something inessential about each transient image; what occupies our attention is the broader framework and set of rules within which each image appears. In short, the many parallel realities in this work do not appear to add up, Merleau-Ponty-style, to a single reality made up of all the viewpoints.

3. Environmental Interactivity

We have already encountered several cases in which Stanza's artworks interact with the wider environment. Yet there are other pieces in which Stanza claims more explicitly as follows: "the audience is embedded in the artworks. The visitors act as an intervention in the gallery/city/space and become the artwork. They are in effect 'harvested' into the artwork creation."¹³ Let's have a look at a few of them and see what they add to what we have already learned about the artist's predilection for environmental interactivity.

The 2004 work *You Are My Subjects* contains an obvious ambiguity even in the title: are we the subjected vassals of a queen, or the liberated subjects of Cartesian philosophy? Any possibility of over-reading the title in a specifically British sense is undermined by the location of its security camera feed in New York, which does begin by sounding a bit Orwellian:

CCTV systems are everywhere in the public domain. Millions of hours worth of data are recorded every day by these cameras. We are all unwitting bit part actors, in the filming of our own lives. Usually we cannot watch. The results are not collected for broadcast back to the public. Rather they are monitored, filtered, distributed and archived without our knowledge or permission.¹⁴

But as usual with Stanza, the work itself is not some grim, puritanical, morally superior critique of the way things are. While "the aestheticization of politics" has been a target of critical theory for decades, the aestheticization of *surveillance* is relatively fresh terrain. Even so, the audience in this piece remains observer and not really observed.

Things are different in *Public Domain: You Are My Property, My Data, My Art, My Love*, an ironic title that signals the same distancing of Stanza from the moralistic/horrified interpretation of surveillance that we have already been

discussing. And here the role of the visitors in the artwork is obviously more participatory than in some of the other pieces:

The Public Domain Series involves using live CCTV systems that are already installed then using these cameras to enhance gallery space and the audiences experience of the gallery: Meanwhile making an artwork that evolves in real time. The 'visitors to the gallery', are in fact assets they could be referred to as data. Visitors are units of data, moving around the giant database (the gallery), and it is this data that is used to make the artwork. The gallery (or museum) is turned into an artwork and the visitor (or audience) into collaborators. The visitors to the gallery are in fact the artwork and they become embedded in the system (the gallery) and they become voyeurs. It's a reflexive spectacle.¹⁵

Are the visitors “assets” or “collaborators”? Are they “embedded in the artwork” or “voyeurs”? These questions are no more capable of answer than the question of whether we are the artist’s “property,” “data,” “art,” or “love.” Art has changed from a feeble protest against decisions made above into a humorous extremification of the instruments of Panopticon.

In *Visitors to a Gallery— referential self, embedded* (2008), another attempt is made to turn observation against itself:

A surveillance system embeds the visitors to the gallery inside the artwork. This artwork by Stanza uses a live CCTV system inside an art gallery to create a responsive mediated architecture. Anyone in any of the galleries and all spaces in the building can appear inside the artwork at any time. In this way Stanza creates a parallel universe what he calls “a parallel reality.” The gallery become a panopticon[:] a surveillance space of the live breathing data “The Visitors To A Gallery.”¹⁶

Some species of postmodern theory view self-reflexivity as a privileged means of escaping straightforward representation and metaphysical assumptions. According to this line of thought, the probable best way to undercut the Panopticon would be to have it observe itself. But that is not quite what happens in this “self-referential”

piece, in which gallery visitors have the dual experience of sometimes observing the others and at other times being observed themselves. Far from being a privileged utensil in Stanza's toolkit, self-referentiality has turned out to be just one more way of undercutting the grim Panopticon-concept from within.

In *data data data* (2010) numbers are projected on an outdoor wall. In the artist's words: "The old analogue world of modernism was a world of fluids and gases atoms and molecules. This 'new' digital world is now a world of numbers. Zeros and ones make up the fabric of our space and experiences. As we move about[,] our interactivity affects the ever-changing environment and these changes are reflected back in this real time artwork."¹⁷

The idea is simple, but the effect is surprisingly haunting if you stumble across it unprepared (as I once did, in a city no longer remembered) on some random European street deep in the nighttime. If I read this piece correctly, it marks the final stage in Stanza's gradual internal subversion of the surveillance-concept. Though ostensibly our movements are being converted into numbers, the ultimate prime matter of surveillant bureaucracy, it is *we ourselves* who survey the numbers. As far beyond self-reflexivity as it beyond Foucault's disturbing vision or Žižek's "we have only ourselves to blame" take on the problem, this work turns us into the primary agents of surveillance, even while reducing the data of that surveillance to harmless projected graffiti. Even if Stanza had chosen a numerical font with blood dripping from each of the numbers, there would still be a benevolent air to the piece. The grisly and moralistic pessimism of so much recent art and thought gives way to a greener field of possibilities.

1Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. A. Sheridan. (New York: Vintage, 1995.)

2Bruno Latour and Emilie Hernant. *Paris Invisible City*, trans. L. Carey-Libbrecht, corrected by V. Pihet. Available online at <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/virtual/index.html>. Originally published in French as *Paris ville invisible*. Paris: La Découverte-Les Empêcheurs en rond, 1998.

3Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 202.

4Slavoj Žižek, “Big Brother, or, the Triumph of the Gaze Over the Eye,” in *CTRL Space*, T.Y. Levin (ed.) (London: MIT Press, 2002.) Pages 224-227. The citation above is from page 225.

5From Stanza’s website, http://stanza.co.uk/urban_tapestry/index.html

6Marshall & Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.)

7http://stanza.co.uk/emergentcity_show/index.html

8http://stanza.co.uk/emergentcity_show/index.html

9http://stanza.co.uk/emergentcity_show/index.html

10<http://stanza.co.uk/body/index.html>

11<http://stanza.co.uk/agency/index.html>

12Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans C. Smith. (London: Routledge, 2002.) Pages 77, 79.

13Stanza, personal communication, September 15, 2014.

14http://stanza.co.uk/i_spy/index.htm

15http://stanza.co.uk/public_domain_outside/index.html

16http://stanza.co.uk/cctv_web/index.html

17<http://stanza.co.uk/data/index.html>