

Cast no shadow: Silicon Valley social rearrangements, information profiteering and online community surveillance

'Behind the futuristic promise of a world of fully linked people and objects, when cars, fridges, watches, vacuums, and dildos are directly connected to each other and to the Internet, there is what is already here: the fact that the most polyvalent of sensors is already in operation: myself.'
- The Invisible Committee

A popular pastime amongst my many friends is constantly referring to the amount of images currently stored in our "screenshots" folder, in the photo app of the iPhone. This is done for a reason, surely, beyond just the comfort of relational gossip.

Among the most concerning of times, we will use them as a sort of emotional or social crutch - indeed, some of us will accidentally turn the screenshotting and capturing into a suspended kind of competition. At length we swap images and laugh about the content we've accrued, as well as the density of information held in those single folders. The files contained within often reach way past the thousands. In a private Facebook group, our friends trade off on similar wavelengths, it becomes a giddy rush to report back first with the screenshot. We have become self-appointed carriers of community news, breaking stories to each other in much the same way journalists rush to get the scoop on current events.

If I'm being frank.....it's difficult to grapple with how we reached this point. I wish we hadn't pushed past our ethical doorways, where the morality of our pathological monitoring hadn't been spirited away with off-handed humour. In the way that some people might note current events or significant cultural moments, our methods of communication and documentation centre on screenshotting and sharing. But I don't think we are to blame for having been led down this path. There is more at play that dictates how we will engage with each other.

There's a certain reliability in these images that hearsay can't reach. But it can be unfair to assume that something said once will still hold the same weight months after.

That the developers of the Photos app thought to include screenshots as a single folder says a lot to me - maybe their intention was for it to serve a practical use, but to me its presence is a bit more cheeky. If the tenets of late capitalism, which Apple follows very well.... as that is what they represent.....relies on that classic 'supply and demand' thing, maybe they are just giving their damn audience what they want. Much can be gained by encouraging or isolating certain features so as to make them more accessible, more seductive. Or perhaps this emphasis is profitable to Apple, who have a sophisticated approach to co-opting information that isn't explicitly theirs. In episode 42 of *Chapo Trap House*, they ascertain that the iPhone is the single biggest profit engine of any product in history, and that if anything, Apple is if the centre of Silicon Valley. On top of this piece of trivia, Silicon Valley has generated more wealth than anything else in human history. Apple is in the business of wealth.....and stealth! The information they have mined has become prime capital.

In her works, Mia Van Den Bos hypothesises that Silicon Valley developers are not only creating new technologies - they're actually attempting to manipulate social interconnection for the purpose of profit, essentially re-establishing the whole order of the Western world so that selected behaviours can lead to purchases. Maybe this sounds too sinister, too hyperbolic, but when we also live in a world where Donald Trump can be president, our threshold of disbelief can surely be extended further than that.

This religiosity of the painting *A Patagonia fleece in flames* comes to mind as an example of her artistic sleuthing. The Patagonia fleece vest, a uniform of choice worn by the eerie executives of Silicon Valley, sits at the pinnacle of Van Den Bos' painting. The modern man does not have a spiritual centre, but he might have the omnipotent voice of Siri to guide him instead (btw, all those voice recordings are being stored somewhere. Surprise.) Perhaps this suggests that surveillance culture as a whole is just another hobby project, elevated to a daily worship, one more app so surreptitiously created by developer frat boys. Perhaps the rhetoric of app branding is not dissimilar to the way the Bible may have been peddled aeons ago.

Consistently keeping tabs on other people, filling up arsenals, trying our hardest to build up a good offensive strategy, is a method of avoidance that is acutely pathological. The endpoint of capitalism's effect on human communication. It relies on skirting issues, of establishing alienating social models, of a defensive comparison against anyone who poses an existential threat. This is, in effect, the desired outcome of social media profiteering. Insecurities can be hacked away at your own discretion. These self-evaluations encourage dishonesty and competitive relations. You can't allow vulnerability to exist if you're readying yourself to pounce, to claw at the throat of a friend who posted something "probbo"; much less an enemy or hater. There's a more sinister side of screenshotting and voluntary monitoring that is being deconstructed here that has, thus far, gone unrecognised in the larger discussion of surveillance. Imagery under late capitalism is always so fraught, and photos can be ~alternative facts as much as news reports can be.

As time goes by and I become more vigilant (or.....paranoid) I realise that people, generally, have less control over their behaviour as they would like to think they do. They act as sponges for the values of hegemonic culture at large, be that the rigidity of patriarchal behaviour, hyper-colonial hangovers of what is right and honourable, or whether that is perpetuated through old social structures, workplace interactions and the ever-presence of media and advertising. They convince themselves their choices are independent of significant outside influence. Yet, the groundwork set up by prideful old white men hundreds of years ago remains steady, encouraging the same things it has always done. It just had it's face done, had a few young blood transfusions here and there and got a new wardrobe.

The way contemporary society works - which is usually described as neoliberalism - separates, enhances, tokenises, invalidates, and isolates. Alexis Pauline Gums in a roundtable for *The New Inquiry* proposes that this is also the framework of prison, which could also be accurately

extended to contemporary culture, saying that 'prison as culture presumes a certain set of problems and reinforces a dominant reaction in our imaginations.' So if the manner of institutions like the police and government, for example, is to exploit information and to weaponise image sharing especially, this mitosis will trickle down unconsciously to all segments of society and the people in them, even the most humble of internet users.

In retrospect, this transgression of privacy isn't entirely recent. Moral panics about all kinds of 'ambitious outsiders', be they pedophiles, rapists or kidnappers, have triggered the protective responses of Australian parents and restricted the mobility of young people, even before 9/11. These public anxieties have acted as effective social control, keeping people behind closed doors and afraid to be out in their communities without self-surveilling. I sometimes think that people are much more suspicious of their neighbours than they might have been 50 years ago, even in a relatively peaceful country. Maybe the difference is that now we anticipate the presence of different kinds of bogeyman in our suburban havens. It's just that now that person is, say, an imagined dark-skinned Muslim terrorist over a Russian spy.

Like the frightening and borderline psychopathic intentions of Silicon Valley developers, Van Den Bos has an intentionally playful side and does not hesitate to string all of these neuroses together. She recognises and points at the ulterior motives of sneaky companies with a keen determination, exposing uncomfortable fallacies, sort of that like that reaction image/twitter meme of the satisfied black femme winking and extending her index finger towards the camera. She arrives on the planet of discourse with a resounding boom, stepping forth from her capsule spaceship as if to say "I see what you are doing.....binch", but do not be alarmed! Her practice is never too brazen, there is still evidence of a clear intention. Sinking into the energy of her paintings streamlines those dangling thoughts and conflicts, incomplete feelings and concerns that don't necessarily demand a resolution. Her work approaches the newer dialogues of misguided vigilante community surveillance and how they shape the very fabric of day-to-day communication and human relations, of friendships and acquaintanceship.

Much of the ~discourse around surveillance pertains to the state and it's responsibilities, that is to say, the watchful eye of a paternalistic government and all of its subsidiaries, or even companies and institutions that have something to gain by non-consensually taking data and selling it. How does this change when the conversation shifts to the way communities monitor each other? How does this affect their conduct and the energy of the respective ecosystems? In *Cast no shadow* Van Den Bos includes the form of eggs in relation to the symbolic sacredness of the Patagonia vest to the Bay Area elite, both cut and pasted onto collages and crafted into tactile physical forms in the space. The juxtaposition brings to mind the manic and aspirational hope, pathways and options otherwise quashed by hegemonic society. The impression one receives is of a potential - translucent and burgeoning, so familiar and at once remote and alien. It is this space between comfort and discomfort that Van Den Bos inhabits.

The major concern of civilians first learning about the extent of government surveillance is that a larger more conspiratorial power is actively seeking out their information and sharing it. But half

of that work we're basically doing ourselves - they barely have to break a sweat to reap the benefits. All of the information we enter online at any time becomes coded resources, which are sent off into unknowable places, to land in the hands of the people we definitely do not know. In William Bogard's book *The Simulation of Surveillance* (1996), one which according to Rob Horning "has the misfortune of being a book about ubiquitous surveillance written a decade before the emergence of social media" he claims that "screens don't "watch" people or "invade" their privacy; increasingly, they are their privacy. The mildly pleasurable stupor induced by interacting with screens is the most pure form of privacy." We lull ourselves into a false sense of security, that we are the watchers, not the watched.

In one of her works titled *Joanne joins a black bloc* a screenshot is stealthily seen in the background of the painting. As the wallpaper is seen to be peeling off, the true backdrop, the real evidence, remains. These photos we've taken continue to haunt us long after they've even been wiped off our phone. The Australian government has already rolled back privacy laws around our meta-data, the accompanying information or "envelope" to any image that may have once been stored on our iPhones. Although Mia may not have set out to make these claims, it's ultimately relevant to the overarching ethic of her argument. It is anxiety-inducing to realise that the internet mimics a forensic crime scene. DNA, or in this instance a different kind of information, lingers long after something has been deleted, removed, or covered up. Walter Kim's now notorious essay for The Atlantic acknowledged this succinctly long before any other writers did, beckoning the reader to be more mindful of the way they occupy digital stadiums. He proclaims, 'What's freely given can't be stolen. Interiority on Planet X-Ray is a burden that's best shrugged off, not borne. My teenage friend was onto something. Become a bright, flat surface. Cast no shadow.'

The glow of my iPhone is the first surface to receive and reflect the light each morning in my new bedroom. The sun gifts the tiny space, immediately refracting off every mirror into each corner of my room, leaving no stone unturned. I give the phone a look and then move my hand over to muffle it with my sheets, then turn over and fall back asleep, dreaming of nothing, imagining nothing.

-Jonno Revanche, 2017