

# Life is Serious; **ART SERENE**

## **Biography**

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# RETHINKING THE POWER OF ART: SOCIAL RESPONSE TO THE ARCHITECTURE OF CONTROL IN THE HYPERCAPITALIST ERA

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## Abstract

Modern society and its institutions have been reshaped by global trends in technological and financial innovation, driven by consumerism, market dominance, increased corporate influence, media manipulation, intense migration, and rapid ecological shifts. These processes grant the built environment a key role in upholding political structures, fundamentally altering how space is perceived and utilized. In the age of hypercapitalism, we are witnessing the rise of an urban neopanopticon—a society of surveillance and control—where we are paradoxically led to believe in our freedom, with the illusion that we possess all the tools to assert it. This transformation of urban spaces inspires both creative responses and various forms of civic participation and resistance. This paper critically examines how art interacts with or challenges these structures of power and control in the context of hypercapitalism, drawing on case studies to explore specific examples of artistic intervention. In doing so, it addresses the broader societal response to these mechanisms, particularly through the lenses of art, architecture, and public spaces, offering insights into the potential for art to not only reflect but actively resist systems of control.

**Keywords:** urban neopanopticon, hypercapitalism, civic disobedience, art

## 1. UNIVERSALIZED PANOPTICISM

Contemporary society is a society of normalized surveillance and control, where space is related to formal and informal social control mechanisms. Information and communication technologies development, their widespread use, and implementation reshaped society and created a new power dynamic. Questions of power are essential to understanding how the city works: who makes decisions about urban space, to whom public places belong, who controls the space and use it, and who and how is excluded.

Michel Foucault's theories on surveillance, particularly the idea of a society as a panopticon, have significantly influenced contemporary understandings of power dynamics in society and could be used to better understand how art can actively resist systems of control in urban surroundings. Foucault's concept of the panopticon, originally proposed by Jeremy Bentham, serves as a metaphor for modern surveillance practices, illustrating how power operates through visibility and self-regulation (Foucault, 1995). Foucault's notion of disciplinary power extends beyond physical surveillance to encompass various social mechanisms that enforce norms and regulate conduct. This idea is echoed in the work of Simon, who discusses the resurgence of panopticism in the context of new surveillance technologies, suggesting that modern electronic means of surveillance have evolved but still reflect Foucault's foundational ideas (Simon, 2002; Manokha, 2018).

Regardless of the fact that contemporary scientific literature on smart cities mainly emphasizes the positive aspects of mass surveillance, data collection, and big data analysis, and suggests that transforming metropolises into smart cities is a key factor in enhancing residents' quality of life, many aspects of universalized neopanopticism are present. In theory, the smart city concept aims at modern urban management through advanced technical tools, offering cutting-edge technologies while adhering to ecological standards, conserving resources, and achieving desired outcomes (Winkowska, Szpilko, Pejić, 2019; Winkowska & Pejić, 2021). To convince people that surveillance systems are productive and beneficial, those in power argue that surveillance ensures security, safety, convenience, and fairness. To highlight these advantages, public media, including advertising, often uses visual imagery of peaceful, happy families, directing attention to the positive aspects of surveillance. When these images are disseminated through mass media, people are more likely to accept surveillance and control as essential measures for maintaining a safe life, especially in an era marked by global threats such as terrorism, financial crises, and the spread of pandemics. Even before the development of Smart cities, in the 1990, Gilles Deleuze (see Deleuze, 1992) foresaw a future city where natives carried e-cards to swipe in the morning when leaving home, and then when entering the office, and when checking out at lunch, when stopping at a restaurant in the evening. Today, that single card has converted into multileveled gathering by multiplying gatherers: contemporary technological reality is wildcatting data collection (Brusseau, 2020: 4).

The envisioned operation of smart cities aligns closely with the core principles of hypercapitalist societies, such as intensified market dominance, growing wealth inequality, corporate power, consumer culture, globalization, economic integration, and innovations in technology and finance, along with increased surveillance and control. Under capitalist forces, space becomes increasingly abstract, commodified, and less defined by its physical and geographical characteristics or its use value. In this system, the increasing production of impersonal "non-places" that are socially empty, detached from local context, and driven by instrumental needs, emerges. In these environments, controlling the behavior of the population becomes easier, as the lack of social and cultural ties creates a more uniform and manageable space. We are witnessing social atomization, detraditionalization, and radical disintegration of trust, which all help in deepening the practices of surveillance and the movement toward totalitarianism (see Vetter, 2012: 95).

The reciprocal relationship between power and space, as articulated by Foucault, indicates that surveillance is not merely about watching but also about shaping the spaces in which individuals operate (Randall & Newell, 2014; Koskela, 2002). Analyzing the two, Foucauldian modern modalities of power – disciplinarity and biopolitics – in a study of a mixed-use neighborhood in downtown Vilnius, Šupa (2015) showed that built structure, regardless of its function, employs both disciplinary and biopolitical techniques of social control at three distinct levels: a) urban planning, prescribed functionality and its correspondence to actual use; b) means of limiting access, containment and transparency; c) circulation of populations and their compliance to the particular spatial setup they find themselves in (Šupa, 2015). Šupa also identified distinct disciplinary and biopolitical strategies for spatial control. Disciplinary practices focus on organizing and

maintaining functional order, enforcing physical access, containing and monitoring static populations (those remaining within structures), and ensuring the hierarchy of these populations (where relevant). On the other hand, biopolitical practices involve planning and risk management strategies, the use of technical tools for access enforcement (such as public surveillance technologies), and managing the dynamics of circulating populations (Šupa, 2015: 36). This spatial dimension of power is crucial in understanding how surveillance technologies, such as CCTV, create environments that facilitate control and normalization of behavior (Yar, 2002).

Moreover, the implications of Foucault's theories are evident in various contemporary contexts, including public libraries, train stations, governmental urban structures, schools, factories, shops, restaurants, churches, prisons, hospitals etc. For example, Randall and Newell explore how video surveillance in libraries reflects panoptic principles, where the design of space influences user behavior and reinforces institutional authority (Randall & Newell, 2014). Similarly, Koskela discusses the "Cam Era," positing that urban surveillance technologies extend the panoptic gaze into public spaces, thereby reshaping social interactions and power relations (Koskela, 2002).

This extension of surveillance into everyday life raises critical questions about privacy, autonomy, and the ethics of observation in a digital age (Saulles & Horner, 2011). Foucault's insights into self-surveillance are particularly relevant in discussions surrounding health and social behavior. For instance, Grant et al. examine how surveillance practices in smoking cessation programs illustrate the internalization of disciplinary norms, where individuals monitor their behaviors in response to external surveillance (Grant et al., 2015). This aligns with the notion that modern societies increasingly rely on self-regulation as a form of governance, where individuals are conditioned to act following social expectations due to the omnipresence of surveillance (Vaz & Bruno, 2002).

The integration of information and communication technologies into all aspects of urban life added complexity to the social networks within cities. These technologies not only shape urban spaces but also reinforce surveillance culture, blurring the lines between public and private life. Architectural landscape is being reshaped by surveillance technologies. Urban spaces are increasingly designed with surveillance in mind, often prioritizing security over privacy. This has led to a proliferation of surveillance technologies in public spaces, which can create environments that are both visually and psychologically oppressive (McGillivray, 2019). The aesthetic choices made in urban design can either reinforce or resist surveillance practices, as seen in the works of artists who utilize public space to provoke discussions about visibility and control (Hogue, 2024). The relationship between art and architecture in this context becomes a site of contestation, where the implications of surveillance are both critiqued and reimagined.

Our cities are increasingly becoming heavily monitored environments, where the possibility of individual anonymity is steadily disappearing. Smart city initiatives have often been used as a justification to normalize and institutionalize the systematic generation and collection of data by both governments and the private sector, purportedly for the benefit of citizens (*Surveillance and the City: Turning Urban Centers into a Panopticon*, 2018). According to Vetter (2012: ) "control in the home, the workplace, the classroom, the hospital and almost every other architectural apparatus is a sign that we have come to live in a time of universalized Panopticism". This leads to many side effects of surveillance like the desensitization to surveillance which leads to gradual normalization; potential data misuse and the blurred boundary of privacy or privacy erosion.

Open, public spaces—once potential arenas for social disobedience, creative rebellion, and freedom of thought—are increasingly subject to surveillance and control. The content and architecture of the city shape the urban experience, but as Kevin Lynch (Lynch, 1960) argues, the city is not merely a physical structure; it is a process intertwined with the mental images people hold of it. Our interaction with the environment is deeply shaped by how we conceptualize it—what Lynch calls a "cognitive map"—and the city and its inhabitants continually influence one another, creating a distinct "urban climate." In this context, surveillance becomes a key feature of urban life, controlling the flow of people, information, and behaviors, further reinforcing the transformation of cities into spaces of control rather than spaces of freedom.

The modern city, in its clumsy physical form, becomes a place where the individual no longer finds peace

(Pušić, 1997: 357). As Simmel observed, the metropolis creates unique psychological conditions, intensifying nervous stimulation and contributing to indifferent, blasé attitudes. Life in the city increasingly revolves around impersonal, homogenized experiences, stripping away individual uniqueness and authenticity (Simmel, 2008: 289). Despite growing dissatisfaction with urban life, migration toward rural areas remains rare, even amid the rise of control and surveillance systems that monitor urban populations. Our challenge is to analyze whether art can spark reflexivity in individuals who may lack an inherent sensitivity to art, do not possess advanced education, and are unaware of the pervasive reach of surveillance in daily life.

## 2. SURVEILLANCE VS ARTVEILLANCE

The connection of art, architecture, and surveillance has become a critical area of inquiry, particularly as contemporary society deals with the impact of widespread surveillance technologies. However, we should bear in mind that before the development of reproductive technology, art was used by many powerful entities as propaganda to glamorize and advance their agendas (Cho, 2020). Art was an essential tool for politics. Nowadays, art can be a powerful medium against the architecture of control and surveillance culture.

According to Monahan (2018), some artworks enact plays of avoidance; expose surveillance practices to increase transparency; interrupt data collection and processing; emphasize viewers' complicity or participation in the regimes in question; activate a sense of connection and introspection to make recognition of social responsibility, and some are provocative enough to empower and engage public to actively participate against surveillance systems and systems of control. Artists and architects are increasingly engaging with the themes of surveillance, not only to critique its implications but also to explore the aesthetic dimensions of surveillance practices. This engagement has led to the emergence of concepts such as "artveillance" and "critical surveillance artworks," which challenge the normalization of surveillance in public and private spaces (Celis, 2020).

Artveillance is a term that blends art and surveillance to describe the use of artistic practices to explore, critique, and challenge surveillance systems and cultures. Many artveillance projects use public surveillance systems to critique the social impact of surveillance and cultivate a sense of responsibility on the part of viewers or participants (Monahan, 2018). For example, in 2004, near Hyde Park in London, graffiti and visual artist Banksy created a mural titled *What Are You Looking At?*, as a satirical commentary on surveillance culture. However, this ephemeral piece's lasting impact lies not in its physical existence but in its viral spread as a digital "meme." Reaching millions worldwide in the form of meme, it continues to prompt critical reflection on surveillance, illustrating how street art can amplify social critique far beyond its original site.



Fig. 1. The mural titled *What Are You Looking At?* by Banksy created in 2004 and is located in the Marble Arch underpass in London (Source: <https://www.artofthestate.co.uk/blog/2005/04/24/banksy-what-are-you-looking-at/>)

Another notable example of how a surveillance system can be used as a means for artistic anti-surveillance practice is Jill Magid's "Evidence Locker" which illustrates how visual art can challenge and interrogate surveillance, raising the question about complicity and resistance (Finn, 2012). In 2004, Jill Magid spent 31 days in Liverpool, building a close relationship with Citywatch, the city's public surveillance system managed by Merseyside Police and Liverpool City Council. Her project, *Evidence Locker*, featured videos staged and edited by Magid, filmed by the police using the city's public CCTV cameras. Dressed in a bright red trench coat, she would call the police, providing details of her location and asking them to record her in specific poses or even guide her through the city with her eyes closed, as seen in her video *Trust* (see, Evidence Locker, 2024). Normally, CCTV footage is stored for 31 days unless requested as evidence by the Liverpool police department that puts it into the evidence locker. To access her recordings, Magid submitted 31 Subject Access Request Forms, the legal documents needed to describe the 'incident' being reviewed. She filled out these forms like love letters, expressing her thoughts and emotions at the time. The normalization of surveillance and control, the illusory sense of security and comfort within the social body, is brought to consciousness through artistic projects like *Evidence Locker*.

Coming from the field of fashion Adam Harvey's "Anti-Drone" wear, raises critical questions about visibility and surveillance. This project challenges the notion of total visibility that surveillance technologies aspire to achieve, suggesting that concealment can be a form of resistance (Rhee, 2016). Such artistic practices not only highlight the vulnerabilities created by surveillance but also propose new ways of engaging with these technologies, emphasizing the importance of agency and resistance in the face of pervasive monitoring.

The dialogue between art and surveillance also extends to performance studies, where the embodied experiences of individuals under surveillance are examined. NYC-based troupe *The Surveillance Camera Players*, expresses their opposition to violating protected rights to privacy by performing specially adapted plays and performances (like Orwell's «1984» or Beckett's «Waiting for Godot») in public spaces and in front of surveillance cameras. This perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of how surveillance shapes identities and social interactions (Hall et al., 2016). By shifting the focus to the performances of both watchers and the watched, scholars and artists alike can better understand the complex dynamics of power and control inherent in surveillance practices.

According to Li (Li, 2023: 1), "[i]n the realm of art, artistic interventions serve as a powerful means of expressing dissent against surveillance culture. These interventions raise awareness about the need to safeguard privacy, prompting individuals to become active participants in the social discourse surrounding surveillance culture. Nevertheless, the "counter-gaze" that emerges through artistic interventions may lead to a reversal of roles, where the "watchers" become the "watched", contingent on varying layers of rights".



Fig. 2. Jakub Geltner (2011-2017) created *The Nest* installations that feature clusters of CCTV cameras and satellite dishes, arranged to resemble nests, and placed in various public spaces worldwide (Source: <http://www.geltner.cz/2009/nest-06/>)

Jakub Geltner's *Nest* (2015) invites us to reflect on our comfort with the increasing presence of technology in our lives. It goes beyond the act of watching and being watched; it challenges us to consider the broader societal impact of technology. Whether serving as a social critique or a wake-up call, Geltner's installations urge us to confront the technological landscape we engage with daily. His work offers a layered exploration of contemporary complexities, encouraging us to be mindful of the technological future we are creating, where the boundaries of surveillance are becoming increasingly blurred.

### 3. REACT: SUMMING UP THE JOURNEY OF RESPONSE, EMPOWERMENT, ENGAGEMENT, AND CHANGE

To deconstruct surveillance culture and foster the creation of "reflexive spaces" that promote contemplation, creativity, and personal meaning (Čaldarović and Šarinić, 2008: 338), both art and daily life should intervene, because art is rather serious, than serene. In the realm of daily life, artistic, creative interventions act as a potent form of dissent against surveillance culture. These works raise awareness about privacy rights and encourage individuals to engage actively in social conversations around surveillance, fostering a sense of collective responsibility (Monahan, 2017). This suggests that art is far from passive; it is deeply embedded in the dynamics of social change, with the potential to influence politics, the economy, culture, and daily life. Art holds a unique power to ignite critical reflection and inspire social action. Artists have a social responsibility to react to specific events in society.

ReAction is an organic artistic response to injustice, social inequality, social control, surveillance, poverty, discrimination, destruction of the natural and built environment, etc. This reaction has to be provocative enough to trigger a deliberate collective response to specific social circumstances, and promote the empowerment and inclusion of citizens, all intending to initiate social change. With their libertarian actions, artists can help citizens in the process of developing awareness of specific social problems, encouraging their social action, and reducing the fear of punishment in a system that disciplines. The interest of such system is to control its subjects and produce immanent fear at the very thought of social rebellion and social disobedience. This "counter-gaze" that emerges through artistic interventions may lead to a reversal of roles, where the "watchers" become the "watched", contingent on varying layers of rights. The outcomes of the art projects that engage community should be challenging the architecture of control; reclaiming public spaces; fostering resistance and empowerment; humanizing monitored environments; encouraging transparency and accountability; transforming surveillance into dialogue; creating reflexive spaces. In conclusion, the interplay between art, architecture, and surveillance is a rich field of inquiry that reveals the multifaceted implications of living in a surveillance society. Through critical engagement with these themes, artists, and architects not only challenge the status quo but also invite audiences to reconsider their roles and responsibilities in an increasingly monitored world. This ongoing dialogue is essential for fostering a more nuanced understanding of surveillance and its impact on contemporary life.

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