Counter-Surveillance Art in the Age of Platform Capitalism: *Critical Complicity* or *Radical Exteriority*?

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Abstract

Nel contesto del capitalismo delle piattaforme, la sorveglianza non si cela più nell'opacità delle strutture disciplinari, ma si dispiega in una ipervisibilità pervasiva, trasformando l'esposizione in una modalità di controllo. Questo contributo esamina le strategie estetico-politiche dell'arte di contro-sorveglianza, interrogandone la capacità di opporsi alle logiche algoritmiche dell'estrazione e della previsione. Attraverso una prospettiva teorica che intreccia media studies, estetica digitale e *platform studies*, il contributo introduce i concetti di *critical complicity* (pratiche creative in cui gli artisti riutilizzano tatticamente le tecnologie di sorveglianza dall'interno) e di *radical exteriority* (pratiche creative che programmaticamente si sottraggono alla soggezione algoritmica al fine contestarla). Il lavoro, a titolo di esempio, discute alcune opere di artisti come Hito Steyerl, Paolo Cirio, Trevor Paglen, James Bridle e Holly Herndon, indagando se e come l'estetica della contro-sorveglianza possa generare forme di resistenza effettiva o se, al contrario, essa non rischi di essere inglobata e ricodificata all'interno dei meccanismi predittivi del capitalismo algoritmico. La tesi sostenuta è che, mentre molte forme di sovversione artistica finiscono per riprodurre la logica del sistema che intendono criticare, strategie emergenti come l'*illeggibilità tattica*, l'*offuscamento algoritmico* e la *riconfigurazione infrastrutturale* possono aprire nuove traiettorie di resistenza.

Contemporary surveillance regimes no longer rely on concealment but operate through hypervisibility, subsuming subjects into networks of algorithmic governance where exposure functions as a mode of control. The present article interrogates the aesthetic and political stakes of artistic resistance to platform capitalism's algorithmic governance, examining the shift from *critical complicity* – where artists tactically repurpose surveillance technologies from within – to *radical exteriority*, an aesthetic strategy that seeks to evade incorporation into surveillance systems altogether. Drawing on media theory, digital aesthetics, and platform studies, the contribution discusses how contemporary artistic interventions engage, subvert, or evade algorithmic governance. It includes a discussion of works by Hito Steyerl, Paolo Cirio, Trevor Paglen, James Bridle, and Holly Herndon, and explores whether counter-surveillance aesthetics can generate true resistance or risk assimilation into predictive systems, arguing that while artistic subversion often reinforces surveillance capitalism's logics, emergent strategies – tactical illegibility, algorithmic obfuscation, and infrastructural reconfiguration – may offer new avenues of resistance. Ultimately, the paper situates counter-surveillance art within a broader critique of digital capitalism, questioning whether contemporary aesthetics can carve out zones beyond algorithmic capture or remain ensnared in the infrastructures they seek to contest. The future of artistic resistance, it contends, hinges not on critique alone, but on the speculative construction of post-surveillance paradigms.

1. Introduction

To see is to govern. To be seen is to be captured. Surveillance, once an exercise in watching from above, has become something else entirely. No longer confined to institutional oversight, it operates through dispersed networks of prediction and modulation, shaping the conditions under which visibility, agency, and subjectivity take form. Observation has become preemption; control has become optimization. If the *panopticon* was a machine of internalized discipline, contemporary surveillance is a machine of probabilistic governance, a system in which power no longer waits to observe but moves first, shaping the very terrain of what can be thought, seen, or enacted.

How, then, does art resist? The critical reflex is to unveil the hidden mechanisms of power, to expose the apparatus, to render it visible. But in an era where surveillance does not hide but proliferates, where control operates by means of its own spectacular self-evidence rather than secrecy, what remains for resistance? If to be seen is to be captured, is visibility itself an obsolete strategy? The aesthetics of counter-surveillance can no longer rely on revelation alone. It must instead explore the strategic refusal of legibility, the cultivation of opacity, the aesthetics of disappearance. To make oneself unintelligible to the algorithm, to become noise in the system, to elude the extractive logics of datafication – these may be the new imperatives of artistic resistance. Yet, even this refusal is fraught with paradox. Can one truly stand outside a system whose power does not function through exclusion but through capture? If the algorithm absorbs even its own glitches, if resistance itself is subsumed into new circuits of commodification and prediction, then where does the possibility of escape lie?

This paper explores counter-surveillance art as a practice suspended within these dilemmas. It hypothesizes the possible shift from «critical complicity» – the tactical repurposing of surveillance tools from within – to the pursuit of «radical exteriority», an aesthetics that seeks to refuse incorporation altogether. But is such an exteriority possible, or is resistance doomed to remain inside the system it critiques, turning its own strategies into yet another mode of visibility? Through an analysis of artistic practices that do not simply depict surveillance but attempt to intervene in its operational logic, this paper asks whether counter-surveillance aesthetics can be anything more than a simulation of resistance.

2. *Algorithmic Individuation* under Platform Capitalism

The algorithmic regime underpinning platform capitalism has catalyzed a profound reconfiguration of social relations, extending beyond mere technological mediation to establish new forms of cognitive capitalism (Srnicek, 2016). Central to this transformation is an infrastructure of *algorithmic surveillance*, where human experience is quantified as behavioral data, commodified, and repurposed for predictive control (Zuboff, 2019). This regime operates through probabilistic calculations of the future, reshaping human agency and temporality, and necessitating theoretical frameworks that transcend traditional models of surveillance. It enacts a «predictive social ontology» (Brakel, 2016), where algorithmic mediation intertwines with human agency, actively constructing the conditions of possibility for social existence. This shift fundamentally alters the relationship between perception and possibility within a regime of preemptive modulation that operates beneath conscious awareness (Hansen, 2015).

The speculative implications of this transformation invite a reexamination of foundational theories of power and subjectivity. Foucault's (1975) analysis of disciplinary power, with its emphasis on the internalization of normative frameworks and the production of docile bodies, provides a historical counterpoint to the algorithmic present. The panopticon, as Foucault describes, relies on the internalization of surveillance, where individuals regulate their behavior under the assumption of constant observation. In contrast, algorithmic governance operates through *algorithmic subjectification*, where the very conditions of subjectivity are shaped by computational processes. This marks a departure from Foucault's later work on «technologies of the self» (1988), extending into a realm where the self is no longer just disciplined but algorithmically constituted. The subject is no longer a stable entity but a dynamic construct, continuously reshaped by the data flows and predictive models that define platform capitalism.

Deleuze's (1992) prescient theories on control societies anticipated this transformation, identifying how modulation would replace enclosure as the dominant mode of social organization. Yet contemporary surveillance systems exceed even Deleuze's framework of continuous control. The algorithmic architectures of platform capitalism institute a regime of *preemptive modulation*, where control operates by structuring the field of possibility through algorithmic logics, shaping actions and outcomes in advance.. This marks a shift from Deleuze's emphasis on «dividuation» – the fragmentation of individuals into data flows

– to a form of *algorithmic individuation*, where subjectivity emerges through complex inter-actions between human consciousness and computational systems.

However, Contemporary surveillance no longer operates solely through visual regimes of discipline (Foucault 1977), but through algorithmic modulation and predictive abstraction. Deleuze's (1992) concept of "societies of control" and Zuboff's (2019) analysis of "surveillance capitalism" remain foundational, yet insufficient for understanding how aesthetic practices intervene in computational regimes. This paper therefore introduces *radical illegibility*, meant as artistic strategies that actively resist readability, recognition, and algorithmic capture, shifting the emphasis from exposure to refusal. Indeed, while many artists engage surveillance through strategies of exposure or visualization, these approaches are not *inert universalism*: works that aestheticize surveillance while flattening its political specificity. One artist interviewed by Kate Crawford and Luke Stark (2021), in their study on the ethics of AI in artistic practice, describes artworks that re-enact surveillance systems rather than disrupting them as "cop art", a pointed phrase that captures how such works risk mirroring the very dynamics they aim to critique, as these works replicate the aesthetics and operations of surveillance without undermining them. Such critiques expose a key limitation of visibility-based strategies. Namely, that rendering surveillance visible does not inherently render it vulnerable. The notion of *radical illegibility*, as developed in this paper, arises precisely from this impasse. Instead of re-performing or iconizing systems of recognition, it proposes a mode of strategic refusal: one that misaligns with protocols of capture, corrupts data flows, and reroutes perceptual circuits away from legibility.

Yet to insist too exclusively on the algorithmic saturation of subjectivity, or the ontological instability produced by machinic modulation, would be to risk foreclosing the very horizon of excess that counter-surveillance practices seek to illuminate. If resistance is to be more than a simulated glitch in an all-consuming apparatus, the theoretical framework must remain attentive to the immanent possibility of disjunction, misalignment, or refusal, however minimal, within the surveillant *dispositif*. In this respect, it is productive to bring into dialogue the present account of predictive governance with David Lyon's (2018) theorization of a «culture of surveillance», which resists binary formulations of domination and instead emphasizes the ambivalent, negotiated, and participatory dynamics of contemporary visibility regimes. Surveillance, in this view, is not framed as an apparatus imposed from above but a socio-cultural

formation that entwines desire, complicity, and critique. This shift does not evacuate the critical thrust of surveillance studies but reframes the field to account for zones of mediated agency and those moments when individuals and collectives perform legibility, opacity, or disobedience with tactical precision. If the platformed subject is shaped through algorithmic individuation, it also retains a precarious capacity to reroute its own legibility, inhabiting visibility as a terrain of contestation and tactical reconfiguration. Counter-surveillance art brings this paradoxical inhabitation into focus as a speculative modulation of its own conditions of existence, engaging with the operations of power from within and reshaping their contours through situated intervention. Therefore, digital surveillance platforms do not inaugurate a new epoch but intensify existing logics of mediation and control, folding everyday perception and cultural expression into infrastructures calibrated for visibility, prediction, and value capture. This mediation operates through compound systems of data collection and algorithmic processing that extend far beyond traditional forms of monitoring.

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Sensory data is processed at speeds and scales beyond human detection, giving rise to micro-temporal media operations (Hansen, 2015). These operations, imperceptible to our senses, nonetheless weave algorithmic logic into the fabric of perception, subtly shaping aesthetic experience and operating beneath conscious awareness, structuring the conditions for experience without being directly predictive or anticipative. Machine learning systems generate predictive models that interpret and actively shape human behavior, creating a feedback loop between users and algorithms. Adaptive interfaces, designed to optimize engagement metrics, render the user both subject and object of algorithmic control. This computational ecology dissolves the boundaries between human and machine, perception and

prediction, art and algorithm, underscoring the profound impact of algorithmic infrastructures on cultural and social experience (Fuller, 2005).

3. The Techno-Aesthetic Regime of Contemporary Surveillance

The «platformization of cultural production» (Nieborg and Poell 2018) offers a privileged vantage point from which to interrogate mutations in the regime of the aesthetic that were already operative within late capitalism modes of cultural production. The artwork's transformation from discrete object to processual assemblage emerged through successive reconfigurations of cultural and technological *dispositifs*, a transformation analyzed through different lenses by scholars of digital culture (Manovich 2001) and platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017). Platform infrastructures have not inaugurated but intensified and rendered visible these ongoing mutations, as artistic works become increasingly enfolded within the algorithmic matrices of computational capital (Morris 2020; Raffa and Pronzato, 2025). These shifts suggest an acceleration of the artwork's becoming-processual, a crystallization of transformations in how cultural objects circulate and generate meaning within digital economies. Under the aegis of digital infrastructures, artistic production dissolves into a volatile assemblage wherein authorship, agency, and aesthetic autonomy are incessantly renegotiated through machinic inscription and datafication. The aesthetic object is thus reconstituted as a liminal entity – neither purely human nor purely machinic – articulated through the recursive entanglements of algorithmic governmentality and platform visibility regimes. Within this techno-social *dispositif*, creativity may cease to be the expression of a sovereign subject and instead evolves as a contingent event, distributed across the asymmetrical negotiations between human desire and machinic intelligence. Artistic interventions in surveillance systems materialize the liminality of the digital aesthetic, unfolding at the threshold between technical manipulation and aesthetic experimentation. These gestures operate through what Mackenzie (2002) theorizes as «technicity» – the productive tension between technical systems and cultural practice. Here, the artwork ceases to be a stable representation and instead emerges as what Simondon (1958) would recognize as a technical object with its own evolutionary trajectory. This transformation recalls Galloway's (2004) reflection on how protocol shapes artistic intervention within networked systems, with art engaging technical infrastructure directly, operating through its logics instead of representing them from a distance.In the context of surveillance capitalism,

the subversion of algorithmic architectures – through the exploitation of machine learning vulnerabilities or the redirection of data flows – renders visible the ruptures in computational governmentality, exposing the spectral gap between algorithmic prediction and embodied experience. No longer a passive site of reflection, the aesthetic becomes an «actant» within networks of *human* and *non-human* agency (Latour 2005), performatively enacted across what «flat ontology» of socio-technical assemblages. The artwork then emerges as a mediator transforming the relations it establishes.

Temporal disjunction amplifies this instability, unsettling inherited conceptions of aesthetic duration. Algorithmic systems operate within micro-temporal regimes that evade direct phenomenological apprehension, yet they structure the very conditions of contemporary perception. In the machinic temporalities of digital art, the event unfolds in real-time, subject to the aleatory flux of data and the contingent reconfigurations of artificial cognition. The artwork, thus, no longer precedes its own reception but materializes through the recursive negotiation of heterogeneous timescales – human, computational, and planetary. In this differential temporality, the aesthetic resists closure, remaining perpetually open to unforeseen emergence.

Within this horizon, the politics of digital art cannot be disentangled from its technicity. The *pharmakological* nature of algorithmic mediation – where technology oscillates between cure and poison – discloses the ambivalent position of aesthetic practice in the age of computational capitalism (Stiegler, 2019). If digital infrastructures inscribe patterns of surveillance and control, they also open spaces for transformation. The artwork becomes a point of engagement within these systems, intervening in their operations and altering their circuits, redirecting machinic processes toward alternative configurations of perception and agency. Digital aesthetics, in this light, operates as a form of technopolitical resistance that escapes the bounds of conventional critique. Against the hegemonic ontologies of platform capitalism, where datafication disciplines subjectivity into predictive legibility, the artwork asserts an insurgent indeterminacy, a refusal to be subsumed into the computational calculus of optimization. By engaging directly with the materiality of algorithmic infrastructures, digital art articulates a counter-practice of mediation, where the reprogramming of technical systems becomes a horizon for reimagining collective existence beyond the machinic imperatives of surveillance and control.

4. Counter-Surveillance Art in Practice

Resistance to algorithmic power calls for a rethinking of agency within computational environments, not in terms of sovereign control but as a situated modulation of machinic processes. Tactical media practices, operating at the intersection of aesthetic disruption and infrastructural engagement, give form to this resistance as a mode of counter-operativity that avoids straightforward opposition and instead reroutes, distorts, and interferes with the predictive architectures of platform capitalism (García and Lovink, 1997). Within these tactical gestures, algorithmic noise emerges as a mode of generative dissent, a disruptive force that unsettles the seamless integration of surveillance into the rhythms of everyday life. Whether through generative art, data obfuscation, or the deliberate invocation of algorithmic glitches, such interventions render visible the fragility of computational control, revealing its contingency and constructedness (Bridle, 2018). If individual acts of interference fracture algorithmic hegemony from within, collective infrastructures of resistance expand this fissure into a terrain of shared agency. Data cooperatives and decentralized platforms constitute an emergent horizon for reclaiming control over digital subjectivity, contesting the monopolistic architectures that configure users as extractable data-points within the logic of platform accumulation (Milan and van der Velden, 2016). These formations redistribute informational sovereignty while simultaneously giving rise to a new techno-politics of the commons, transforming computational infrastructures from instruments of capture into sites for articulating alternative socio-technical imaginaries. The notion of «algorithms of resistance», as formulated in recent analyses (Bonini and Treré, 2024), extends this field of contestation to everyday practices and grassroots movements, foregrounding the capacity of collective agency to reroute the normalization of algorithmic governance into unforeseen trajectories of autonomy and empowerment. Beyond infrastructural reclamation, resistance demands an epistemic rupture, a critical algorithmic literacy able to demystify the operations of computational governmentality. This literacy is not reducible to technical expertise but can manifest itself an aesthetic and intellectual project, where the critique of algorithmic totality converges with the speculative reimagining of digital culture itself. If algorithmic power operates by making its processes appear natural, resistance involves more than intervention. It requires reconfiguration, transforming computation into an open field of possibility instead of a sealed system of predictive determinacy. This is, I believe, the sense of producing counter-surveillance art.

Counter-surveillance art encompasses a range of artistic practices that critically engage with surveillance technologies, exploring their social, political, and epistemic implications. While often framed as acts of resistance, such practices do not necessarily dismantle surveillance itself but expose its logics, limitations, and contradictions, sometimes even becoming entangled with the very infrastructures they seek to challenge. I will now examine specific artistic strategies by discussing some works that I believe exemplify different approaches to engaging with surveillance systems.

Hito Steyerl's *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013) enacts a critical engagement with the infrastructures of surveillance, foregrounding the entanglement of resolution, recognition, and social control. Conceived as a parody of instructional media, the work stages five lessons on disappearing in an era of ubiquitous surveillance, blending digital effects, performance, and theoretical inquiry. Yet, instead of offering practical guidance, its pedagogical structure exposes the paradoxes of visibility, demonstrating how disappearance is always already inscribed within the technical and epistemic frameworks of computational vision. At the core of Steyerl's intervention is the politics of resolution. Visibility in digital systems is not a given but a function of technical thresholds, where recognition is contingent upon pixel density and algorithmic detection. The work highlights how surveillance operates through acts of observation and, more crucially, through the modulation of legibility – shaping what becomes visible, at what scale, and for whom. This echoes Rancière's (2004) *distribution of the sensible*, wherein regimes of perception delineate the conditions of political agency. Steyerl's manipulation of resolution thresholds – shifting between high-definition clarity and pixelated abstraction – exposes how computational optics produce stratified regimes of subjectivity, where what remains unseen is not necessarily beyond capture but structurally excluded from recognition. The piece also foregrounds the materiality of digital images. Compression artifacts, green-screen illusions, and synthetic landscapes do not simply aestheticize technological mediation; they expose the ways digital infrastructures shape perception. Steyerl's attention to such material conditions seems to me to align with Galloway's (2012) idea of «interface effects», as the visible is always conditioned by the logic of underlying computational architectures.

Another example is Paolo Cirio's *Street Ghosts* (2012), a project that directly intervenes in the material conditions of digital visibility by challenging the legal and ethical implications of

Google's mass data collection. By repurposing images of people captured by Google Street View and installing life-sized prints of these digital traces in their original locations, Cirio exposes the disconnect between digital capture and embodied presence. The project does not restrict itself to critique surveillance but enacts its own form of remediation, shifting digital ghosts back into physical space to reveal how surveillance infrastructures alter the experience of urban environments. At the core of *Street Ghosts* is an exploration of surveillance temporality. The captured figures, frozen at the moment of their algorithmic recording, return as spectral presences in urban space, their persistence highlighting the unintended afterlives of digital documentation. Surveillance does not just observe; it archives, reconfiguring past moments into persistent data points that remain accessible beyond their original context. Cirio's work materializes this process, exposing the ways in which digital surveillance extends beyond passive observation into active restructuring of memory and spatial experience. The project also foregrounds questions of ownership and control. By appropriating Google's imagery, Cirio disrupts corporate claims over social memory, demonstrating how platforms do not simply document but privatize everyday life. The rematerialization of these images in public space transforms passive data into political statements, revealing how surveillance infrastructures shape collective visibility. The weathering and decay of the printed figures add another layer of critique – these images, once preserved by corporate databases, now subject to the elements, point to the tensions between digital persistence and material impermanence. Beyond its immediate intervention, *Street Ghosts* raises deeper questions about the politics of presence and absence in digital culture. Surveillance creates its own forms of erasure: individuals become visible only as data, stripped of agency in processes of algorithmic categorization. By placing these figures back into the city, Cirio forces an encounter between past and present, between embodied subjects and their digital doubles, revealing how surveillance does documents and at the same time transforms social existence through its structuring of visibility.

Instead of relying on the fashionable, overused framework of «hauntology» (Derrida, 1994; Fisher, 2014) as a default lens, we should reframe our approach to account for the material, infrastructural, and political dynamics that underpin the spectrality of surveillance systems. An example that invites us to rethink these dynamics is Trevor Paglen's *Autonomy Cube* (2014). Unlike Steyerl's tactical invisibility or Cirio's spectral street ghosts, Paglen's work engages with surveillance through functional infrastructure. The transparent cube, housing the

components of a Tor network relay, transforms gallery spaces into actual nodes of anonymous communication. Its aesthetic operates at multiple levels: as minimalist sculpture, it references the history of institutional critique; as working technology, it creates zones of digital autonomy within cultural institutions. The work's transparency makes visible the physical architecture of counter-surveillance while simultaneously enabling genuine privacy practices. This dual operation, revealing infrastructure while creating it, points to possibilities for resistance beyond mere representation. Rather than simply critiquing surveillance systems, *Autonomy Cube* demonstrates how art can construct alternative technological architectures, suggesting forms of resistance that operate through creation, not through overt opposition.

Extending this interrogation into urban space, Bridle's *Drone Shadow* series materializes the scale and presence of aerial surveillance technology. By outlining full-scale silhouettes of military drones on city streets, the work transforms abstract technological systems into immediate spatial encounters. These interventions do more than simply mark absence - they create moments of cognitive mapping where viewers can grasp the material dimensions of otherwise invisible surveillance infrastructure. The shadows' precise technical accuracy serves not just aesthetic but pedagogical functions, enabling public understanding of technologies that shape contemporary experience while remaining largely imperceptible. This transformation of military surveillance data into urban inscription demonstrates how artistic practice can make legible the systems of observation that structure public space.

The spectral dynamics of surveillance systems take on a unique form within contemporary music, where sonic interventions complicate the boundaries between artistic expression and algorithmic control. Holly Herndon's *Platform* (2015) offers a sonic exploration of contemporary surveillance infrastructures, operating simultaneously as artistic work and direct intervention in the very systems it critiques. However, by releasing the album on streaming platforms like Spotify, Herndon subjects her work to the same algorithmic processes of data extraction and prediction that govern these platforms, revealing how musical production is inseparable from surveillance systems. Indeed, each play of the album becomes both a cultural event and a data point, illustrating the complex feedback loops between artistic expression and machine learning (Raffa, 2024). Herndon's use of machine learning techniques for vocal processing further complicates this relationship, blending human and algorithmic voice to expose how surveillance platforms reshape human expression. In this sense, the al-

bum reveals the spectral nature of algorithmic control, where creativity is both shaped and surveilled by the very systems that it seeks to critique. *Platform* deliberately engages with surveillance, making visible the paradox of artistic production within a technologically mediated landscape. This engagement reframes surveillance as both a system of control and a site of cultural production, where algorithmic systems continuously shape and redefine the contours of artistic and social experience. Through this speculative intersection of art and technology, Herndon invites a rethinking of the future of creativity in a world increasingly defined by digital surveillance. While *Platform* (2015) articulated Herndon's concerns about platform logics and voice commodification, her more recent work *The Call* (2024), co-created with Mat Dryhurst, pushes these concerns into the terrain of generative AI and synthetic voice production. Presented at the Serpentine Gallery, the piece explores choral performance as a training ground for machine learning, complicating authorship and aesthetic agency in AI-generated outputs. Although not overtly framed through surveillance, *The Call* speaks to machinic capture in a broader sense in which creativity itself is recursively shaped by algorithmic processes, resonating with the project of radical illegibility by resisting clear attribution and embedding collective voices within an opaque generative system.

Hence, different modes of radical illegibility emerge across a range of contemporary artistic practices. Adam Harvey's *CV Dazzle* and Zach Blas's *Facial Weaponization Suite* both refuse capture at the level of the face but do so through distinct aesthetic and political strategies. Harvey's work operates by disfiguring facial features through fashion-based camouflage—using makeup and hairstyle to confuse machine vision systems. Blas's masks, by contrast, articulate a queer collectivity: facial composites generated from multiple users become politically charged forms of opacity that resist identification while simultaneously offering a critique of the biopolitical regime of body recognition. These practices foreground the surface of the body as a tactical site of resistance, where visual data is corrupted at its point of extraction.

In contrast, Holly Herndon's *Platform* (2015) and her later collaboration with Mat Dryhurst, *The Call* (Serpentine Gallery, 2024), displace legibility not on the surface of the face, but within the systems of voice, authorship, and machinic co-creation. *Platform* reconfigures the voice into a modular instrument, destabilizing the unity of the vocal subject. *The Call* extends this strategy through generative AI: trained on hundreds of user-submitted voice samples, the system produces synthetic choral arrangements that challenge conventional ideas

of origin, selfhood, and agency in artistic production. While not explicitly framed as surveillance art, *The Call* enacts a form of creative illegibility by dissolving the boundaries of authorship, making the subject unlocatable within a network of machinic mediation.

Placing these works in dialogue opens a more nuanced understanding of radical illegibility as a heterogeneous field of tactics, unfolding across shifting contexts and resistant to univocal definition. Harvey and Blas operate by refusing recognition; Herndon and Dryhurst complicate authorship itself. What connects them is not aesthetic similarity but a shared resistance to the logics of computational visibility—whether through confusion, distortion, or dispersion. These tensions move the analysis beyond a typological list of examples and instead foreground illegibility as a problem of positionality: how to misalign, distort, or exceed the gaze of extractive systems.

The artistic practices discussed here reveal how surveillance and counter-surveillance art operate within complex technical architectures, engaging with systems of control while unveiling their cultural implications. Surveillance proliferates through spectral architectures that perforate the social field's constitutive boundaries, yet these formations remain contingent upon the very practices that sustain and contest them. Technical assemblages inscribe themselves across surfaces of recognition through iterative performances that generate apparatuses of capture, structures that artistic practice inhabits as sites of ongoing negotiation and potential transformation, no longer fixed or stable in form. The algorithmic gaze constitutes subjects through performative claims of neutral observation, establishing regimes of visibility that precede social intelligibility while remaining dependent upon continuous enactment. Digital traces sediment as experiential debris through processes that transform lived encounters into data substrates, yet this transformation occurs through contested operations whose outcomes remain partially open to intervention and rearticulation.

The spectral quality of these interventions points to profound shifts in human experience, as AI surveillance creates persistent digital traces that reconfigure temporal and social memory. These traces become raw materials for predictive models that govern future behaviors, transforming the past into data that shapes what is to come. These artistic practices expose surveillance technologies as they participate in reconfiguring the texture of social existence. Human perception becomes entangled with machine processing through iterative performances that generate new forms of mediated experience, transforming the conditions

through which life unfolds while remaining open to alternative enactments. The work reveals technical operations through their ongoing participation in broader social formations, tracing how contemporary existence takes shape through technological mediations that exceed their apparent boundaries yet depend upon continuous performance for their effectiveness. The practices follow surveillance into its social inscriptions, uncovering how machine processing becomes woven into perceptual experience through practices that might be otherwise enacted. A transformed yet contingent landscape of contemporary life takes shape, where technological mediation unfolds through constitutive performances that shape experience without imposing predetermined outcomes. These mediations might apparently reshape conditions through which social reality becomes intelligible and experienceable but substantially remain dependent upon the very practices that sustain, contest, and potentially transform them.

5. From *Critical Complicity* to *Radical Exteriority*

The relationship between artistic practice and surveillance systems crystallizes a fundamental aporia in contemporary resistance to algorithmic control. As surveillance infrastructure instantiates specific modalities of technological embodiment through its automated operations, artistic responses oscillate between two distinct ontological positions: working within these systems to destabilize their operative logic, and establishing zones of radical exteriority to their perceptual and infrastructural frameworks. The concept of «critical complicity» arises from within the dense material entanglements of contemporary surveillance infrastructures, where technological systems operate through the relentless accumulation and algorithmic parsing of behavioral traces, folding subjects into feedback loops that blur the boundaries between participation, resistance, and capture. Contemporary artists engage these systems through an *immanent critique*, a mode of resistance that operates through the very architectures it seeks to destabilize. Hito Steyerl's dissemination via YouTube, Paolo Cirio's interventions with Google Street View, and Holly Herndon's use of music streaming platforms exemplify forms of resistance embedded within surveillance infrastructures, exposing the generative tensions that define critical complicity. If surveillance thrives on capture – on making subjects legible, classifiable, and predictable – then the most radical resistance may lie in evading its epistemic grasp altogether. Certain artistic practices do not mirror or appropriate surveillance technologies but instead enact disappearance, misdirec-

tion, and strategic illegibility, crafting spaces that slip beyond the circuits of extractive visibility. Historical practices gesture toward another possibility: the creation of spaces that challenge systems of control and visibility. Theatrical and performative interventions have explored these dynamics in different ways. Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan's *1984* (2013) implicated audiences in its surveillance mechanisms by using live video feeds and unexpected perspective shifts, while James Graham and Josie Rourke's *Privacy* (2014) used audience members' own digital data to demonstrate contemporary surveillance realities. Tania Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper #6* (2009) created a temporary autonomous zone for free speech within institutional space, transforming museum visitors into political subjects. Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne* (1979) reversed typical surveillance dynamics by methodically following and documenting strangers, revealing the power relations inherent in observation. Tehching Hsieh's *Time Clock Piece* (1980-1981), where he punched a time clock every hour for a year, demonstrated how institutional control mechanisms shape human experience through temporal regulation. Earlier artistic experiments explored related questions of visibility and control, though in different contexts. Vito Acconci's *Following Piece (*1969) investigated the power dynamics of observation by methodically following strangers through public spaces. Alan Schneider's and Samuel Beckett's *Film* (1965) explicitly theorizes visibility as a form of control, staging an existential flight from the gaze itself. Chris Burden's *White Light/White Heat* (1975) explored institutional visibility by remaining present but invisible to gallery visitors for twenty-two days. Dan Graham's *Time Delay Room (*1974) used video surveillance systems to create environments where viewers encountered their own delayed image, directly engaging with the mechanics of observation and obfuscation. These practices suggest an anti-surveillance art that does not engage directly with surveillance technologies but instead destabilizes the conditions under which surveillance functions. These practices do not seek recognition or counter-visibility; they move toward imperceptibility, unpredictability, and the ungovernable. If surveillance depends on the capture of data, on the rendering of subjects as calculable inputs, then these works propose an art that escapes power control entirely, existing in gaps, silences, and excesses that no algorithm could parse.

This historical juxtaposition serves as a provocation, not a direct comparison, acknowledging the fundamentally different conditions that shape pre-platform capitalism and post-digital artistic practices. Yet, the critical question remains: *What is the ontological status of*

digital artistic practice? Can digital works exist outside the pervasive reach of surveillance infrastructures? In an era where artistic production is inextricably tied to digital tools and networks, is it possible to carve out zones of resistance that do not inevitably collapse into the very systems they seek to oppose. The answer may lie in exploring how digital tools can be used to sustain critical distance while remaining entangled with contemporary technological conditions, without retreating into fantasies of complete withdrawal. This dialectic between immanent critique and radical exteriority inscribes a complex topology of resistance within contemporary artistic practice. Artists operating within surveillance infrastructure engage in practices of *counter-conduct*, appropriating and redirecting apparatuses of control to destabilize their operative logic. Such practices transcend mere tactical engagement, manifesting what de Certeau (1980) theorized as the subtle art of resistance within strategic systems of power. Yet these maneuvers remain inexorably bound to surveillance capitalism's operational matrix, their very resistance generating new circuits of data capture, algorithmic processing and dissent commodification. As argued by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), capitalism has historically demonstrated an exceptional capacity to absorb and repurpose its critiques, turning opposition into fuel for its own evolution. Under surveillance capitalism, even artistic subversion generates new circuits of data capture and algorithmic processing, ensuring that resistance itself remains an engine of the system it contests.

Recent years have seen a surge of practices that refuse both naïve rejection and adoption of surveillance infrastructures by instead repurposing them from within. Lauren Lee McCarthy's SOMEONE (2019-2021), for instance, enacts humans as smart-home assistants, intentionally blurring lines of agency and intimacy within domestic surveillance regimes. The result is a performative displacement of algorithmic authority into human labor, revealing how convenience and control are mediated through affective mechanics. Similarly, Zach Blas's biometric installations (e.g., *Facial Weaponization Suite*) mimic the look and feel of corporate identity systems only to invert their logic — exposing the aesthetics of control and making legibility itself a site of disobedience. These are not escapes from platform power, but tactical occupations — misalignments that generate moments of opacity, confusion, and critical awareness. Moreover, Julia Scher's long-standing *Security by Julia* performances and her 2022 *Maximum Security Society* installation coax participants into surveillance roles, merging comfort with unease, and compelling them to perform and question visibility from

within. Similarly, Simon Weckert's *Google Maps Hacks* (2019) intervenes in making sense of systems by simulating traffic, compelling infrastructures to reroute real-world users a humorous yet potent *détournement* of data logistics. Both examples illustrate artworks that do not seek exterior purity or oppositional stance, but instead dwell within platforms, exploiting their protocols to create cracks, confusion, and micro-political space.

Historical instances of *radical externality* hint at trajectories beyond tactical resistance. Hsieh's absolute withdrawal and Bruguera's generative social infrastructures manifest modes of perception and experience that rupture dominant systems of visibility and control. These practices do not seek to resist surveillance; but to render their logic inoperative, inaugurating spaces where alternative modalities of artistic and social practice materialize. The problematic of digital externality, however, persists. Contemporary technological conditions appear to foreclose the possibility of complete withdrawal as digital tools inscribe within themselves the logic of surveillance and data capture. This aporia demands a supplement to the binary of *complicity* and *externality*: artistic practices that deploy digital means while maintaining critical distance from surveillance infrastructure.

6. Conclusions

The artistic practices discussed here reveal how surveillance capitalism has altered the conditions of artistic resistance. Where traditional critique assumed a position exterior to its object, contemporary artists confront a contradiction: their tools of resistance are themselves instruments of capture. Every artistic gesture that engages digital infrastructure potentially reinforces the very systems it seeks to subvert. This apparent impasse gestures toward its own resolution. If surveillance capitalism functions through enablement, offering expansive creative possibilities while simultaneously capturing them within algorithmic systems, then resistance must take shape through inventive engagements with the very mechanisms that seek to contain it. This engagement, however, cannot simply inhabit the binary of *complicity versus externality*. It calls for a form of «parasitic aesthetics» that inhabits surveillance infrastructures from within, unsettling their operations while drawing on their logics to generate unforeseen modes of expression. If platform capitalism functions through enablement, extending unprecedented creative possibilities even as it secures their algorithmic capture, then contemporary forms of resistance remain entangled within the phar-

macological logic of digital systems; still it is precisely this entanglement that gestures toward the possibility of its own undoing. The future of resistance lies not in manipulating of existing systems, but in the creation of zones of *radical illegibility*; spaces that escape algorithmic capture by inventing new perceptual and technical paradigms capable of rendering surveillance mechanisms obsolete, rather than opposing them directly. This reflection thus opens onto a more radical horizon: the possibility of artistic practices that go beyond both *critical complicity* and *tactical resistance* to generate genuinely exterior spaces. Not through regression to pre-digital modes but through the creation of post-surveillance infrastructures. Such practices would operate by making systems of control inoperative, generating forms of creative existence that escape the binary of visibility and opacity altogether. In my view, the future of resistance emerges through the speculative construction of an outside to surveillance capitalism, where artistic practices bypass the logics of algorithmic capture altogether and give rise to forms of creation and relation that elude the parsing functions of existing systems of control. This is the future counter-surveillance art approaches, where infrastructures no longer serve as the ground to resist or reconfigure but appear as residues, flickering traces through which other arrangements, however fragile or momentary, begin to coalesce.

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