

# The Art of Online Bodies: Surveillance, Identity, and Collective Narratives

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**Abstract:** *This paper delves into the production of body images in internet art and its interplay with consumer society. Through an analysis of various works related to 'online bodies', the study uncovers the mechanisms of self-exposure and surveillance embedded within these images. These artworks illustrate not only how individuals portray themselves online but also how collective narratives emerge. Furthermore, the paper scrutinizes the role of body images within technological and cultural algorithms, shedding light on their significance in contemporary society.*

**Keywords:** Internet Art; Body Images; Self-Exposure; Surveillance; Collective Narrative.

## 1. SELF-BODY EXPOSURE AND THE MASS ORNAMENT

The production of self-body images on the Internet has become a crucial component of the archival image and consumer society. Regardless of the producers' motives, self-exposure and surveillance both operate through images. The act of self-exposure can be seen as a sacrifice, a payment of the private sphere to the public sphere of the Internet.

The American artist Natalie Bookchin critically examines the media, exploring how new forms of broadcasting and self-expression on the Internet serve as a reference for measuring political attitudes, economic trends, and the evolution of the self. Her work questions "who we think we are as a culture and how we present ourselves to the outside world when performing in front of real and believing audiences". Over the past several years, Bookchin has created collage assemblages using ready-made YouTube videos, subtly examining the porous boundaries between the self and the common, presence and performance.

For "Mass Ornament" (2009), Bookchin browsed through a significant number of user-made dancing videos on YouTube, most of which were recorded indoors using webcams. She arranged these individual films theatrically, using theatrical choruses as background music to integrate the videos into a collective public performance where people from all over the world appear to perform the same stage show.

In "Testament" (2009/2016), Bookchin found similar themes in people's internet video diaries, gathering footage of lonely individuals talking to themselves in front of their screens, and combined them into a single piece. The result becomes a public confession to the world via the Internet. Bookchin compares the camera to a new religion in the age of social media, noting, "People confess to the webcam. They're staring at themselves on the screen as well as their fictional audience. It's a confession to oneself, but also to the millions who might watch it in the future". These collected images constitute a cultural archive of not only the protagonists and their individual yet unified voices but also the technical qualities and documentary norms they employ, grounding them in the evolving technological continuum of the era. According to Paula Kupfer, this cultural archive represents a unique form of 21st-century anthropological study.

Paul Virilio views the webcam as part of the transformation of everyday life, achieving a split between primary reality through the development of a stereoscopic reality-comprising directly manifest actual reality and media-based virtual reality. People turn on the camera and point it at themselves, capturing scenes in unmade beds, bathrooms, or carriages, resulting in what Mark Burris describes as the greatest aesthetic feature: "boredom, ambiguity, and lack of expression". This shared boredom and ambiguity tie all individual fragments together, and when reflected in Bookchin's work, they constitute a shared experience, a repetition of images, and a visible collective narrative. By placing a large number of videos side-by-side, people's spontaneously rehearsed cultural scripts-language, narrative, gesture, and ultimately identity-begin to emerge, revealing the "recitation" of shared scripts as both personal and habitual.

Kurt Caviezel's 2020 work "The Users" presents a group performance of complete webcam captures curated by the artist. Participants enter his web chat rooms, randomly capturing images of each other's webcams, resulting in a mobile portrait of "users."

"The Users" explores a previously uncharted area of image production. While Caviezel emphasizes his identity as a photographer and the act of photography, the images used are essentially produced through an act of "capture." Media scholar Theresa M. Senft describes the dynamic of looking and being looked at online as "crawling," linking this emotional experience to the physical sensation of being touched. "Crawling" refers both to the physical act of grabbing a screenshot and the visually arresting experience generated by a spectacular image. Susanna Paasonen expands on this concept with "grasping" online images, explaining the appeal of mainstream online pornography. Paasonen emphasizes the active element of grasping-being touched or moved and responding accordingly. She argues that being "grabbed" by an image involves emotional dynamics that are often disturbing. This grasping, while not always pleasurable or benevolent, links the conscious and bodily experience of negotiating relationships with others. The grasping of images often describes images of the body, facilitating theoretical discourse about the mediated corporeality evoked by such images.

Caviezel's manipulations activate visual archives of the subject's body, capturing the viewer's attention and allowing these visual archives to unfold in repetitive bodily cues that become overt, performative gestures. The capturing of these images helps us understand the physicality of what the "user" represents. As Caviezel stated regarding his work: "A web image search for the term 'user' returns icons only-graphic symbols. The user does not exist, at least not in pictures. Considering the ubiquity of this notion, this seems paradoxical. Whenever there is mention of the internet, the user is not far. Who, then, is this user?"

In "The Users", the participant, as a real individual presenting themselves on the web with the help of a webcam, becomes a medium through which the viewer must observe. Caviezel's method of observation is paradoxical: the further away you are from people, the closer you become. This reflects the fact that webcams represent, as Burris puts it, an "intimate and detached" mode of vision. It is intimate in that it intrudes upon the surveillant gaze into private space and self-exposure of private space and bodies, but its detachment is reflected in the "boredom, ambiguity, and lack of expression" characterizing the content's aesthetics. When these mundane images are brought together, they create a collective "mass ornament."

In Siegfried Kracauer's essay "Mass Ornament" (1963)-the namesake of Bookchin's work-Kracauer examines how mass production permeates all aspects of social and artistic production through his analysis of the 'Tiller Girls'. Although written in the 1920s, Kracauer's observations still apply to contemporary Internet art, particularly regarding bodily production. Tap dancing, emerging around the end of the 19th century, involves young women of uniform appearance performing synchronized dance movements. Despite the erotic connotations of their attire and movements, Kracauer argues that the women are "de-individuated and de-eroticized", their bodies abstracted into components of a rigorous geometric pattern, stripping them of human subjectivity. This rational structure, rather than the individuals, is what matters, rendering their erotic construction futile. Kracauer describes this as the "American Distraction Factory", aligning with modern mass production and mass culture logic. The audience, too, becomes part of this structural pattern, mirroring the logic of capitalist production and the extinction of individuality.

Joanna Zylińska's book "Nonhuman Photography" also refers to a similar concept. In the book's opening chapter, the author not only classifies machine photography as non-human, but also suggests that even those images taken by humans contain a non-human element. This element is executed through technical and cultural algorithms, a fact revealed by the fact that most people's wedding photos, holiday snapshots, and Instagram feeds look strikingly similar. The individual

"lap dancers" or selfie-takers do not exist, but when they form part of a pattern, they are able to capture the attention of the public.

## **2. GOOGLE, STREET VIEW AND THE BIOPOLITICS OF SURVEILLANCE**

The owner of the largest image archive of the 21st century is undoubtedly Google. In 2007, Google Earth launched its Street View service as an experimental project. Using an SUV loaded with some computers, GPS devices, and multiple cameras, Google employees drove around northern California to take pictures of the average American street. Today, this experiment has become one of the most comprehensive surveillance mechanisms in human history. From cars to backpacks, wheelbarrows to tricycles, camels to snowmobiles, Google Street View (GSV)

has systematically documented an unprecedented swath of the planet and posted it all online. Now, from the privacy of one's web screen, anyone can access a seamless, panoramic map of digitally stitched photos taken from street level around the world.

As already mentioned earlier, long before the advent of Google, In a lecture in 1976, Foucault noted that the corporeal politics of disciplinary surveillance became the biopolitics of the human when new technologies seized a "mass" of power "not against man as body, but against man as species". He then tracked biopolitics' emergence to around the second half of the eighteenth century as the product of a historical transformation of the kind of biological power exerted by the ruling class over its subjects. In his thought, surveillance society began with a panoptic model of sovereignty that exercised its power through the discipline of the individual body in enclosed spaces-hospitals, prisons, factories, schools-that claimed the right to "take life or let life go". The shift to biopolitics, however, established a non-disciplinary form of power that transcends such enclosed spaces to claim the right not to imply a threat, but a less obvious but broader right to "let live and let die". Both forms of power operate through the surveillance mechanisms that regulate human life, although the latter is on a much larger scale. In non-disciplinary societies, Foucault sees that surveillance no longer implies power over individual bodies alone, but over entire populations at the same time.

Again, as we have also mentioned before, we are constantly involved in what Andrejevic calls "digital enclosure", which is "the process by which activities previously conducted outside the monitoring capabilities of the Internet are enclosed in its virtual space". This concept refers to the transportation of different aspects of our lives to the digital realm, partly due to the ease of consumption of digital information, and partly due to "the public's acceptance of the penetration of digital surveillance into the realm of 'free' time". Andrejevic then envisages the concept of "en-closure" as a flexible one, marked by the virtual rather than physical space of technology, which is why he explicitly links his use of 'closure' to a Deleuzian society of control. Becoming a digital enclosure, then, is not a matter of crossing physical boundaries, but of equipping oneself with appropriate technologies: devices that allow users to communicate with the network, to gather information from the network, and to provide information to the network. Entering the enclosure is about embracing interactive technologies 122.

Much of Andrejevic's work on digital enclosures precedes Street View and the way its surveillance exerts biopolitical control over the masses, even without the prerequisite of accepting interactive technology. Unlike the data trails people leave online, that is, you do not need to be equipped with web technology or even have a cellphone in your pocket to become digitally enclosed when a GSV convoy is patrolling a street near you. In other words, the digital world will now come to you even if you have completely withdrawn from it. This suggests that the decentralized nature of surveillance in control societies is not merely a product of the reduction of the human subject to a myriad of data representations that, in theory, a person motivated to retain their singular individuality could avoid by disengaging from the network. Instead, as automated digital programs patrol the streets and "take" photos from physical spaces you may or may not happen to occupy at the time, digital walls become commonplace, bending the already flexible boundary between the virtual and the physical.

Jon Rafman's "Nine Eyes" project-ongoing since 2008 and one of his earliest projects to achieve fame-is arguably the best example of how to respond to this topic. The title "Nine Eyes" comes from the first generation of Google Street View cameras, which consisted of nine cameras. Since 2008, Rafman has traversed Google Street View images and archived them for continuous updating on the website, examining a fantasy world created by technology and revealing how we behave in virtual space. In Rafman's archive of intercepted images, prostitutes wait for business on a deserted highway, pedestrians emerge on the street in strange costumes, sheep take over the highway, scenes of violence appear, and people stare angrily into the camera. In Rafman's words, Google Street View reveals a world where "you are watched by everyone but at the same time no one is really looking at you, and everything in this world is recorded." Google cameras are invisible, mobile, and impartial. They do not move through the road to portray images to build a panoramic view of the world; they objectively record the images of the time and space in which they are located, but do not participate or intervene in them. Unlike traditional surveillance cameras, Google's mobile cameras have the potential to observe and record potentially violent and illegal activities without moral standards or a judgmental stance. In the world of Street View, all content has the same meaning; time and space are erased, and the images are offered to the Internet as both objective and impartial evidence of a concrete reality, but at the same time, as a reminder that our knowledge of reality cannot be complete.

For this project, Rafman mentioned in an interview his interest in exploring how to use technology that alienates us to create art: "Google's mode of recording the world reveals how we perceive: our mode of interaction with ourselves is actually intimately connected to this detached, indifferent way of capturing." The confrontational and

contradictory relationship between the Street View camera, which uses a primitive and mechanical act of collecting data about the space in which we live, and the artist or human observer, who looks to find resonance and meaning in the images, creates both tension and interest in the project. "Silicon Valley controls how data is collected, organized, and consumed online, and the idea of Google as 'neutral' is clearly self-defeating."

Another example is the German artist Simon Weckert's 2020 performance "Google Maps Hacks", which can be seen as a play on the "reality" of data (Google Maps is a different platform to Google Street View, but both are part of the same system). In this work, Weckert slowly transported 99 second-hand smartphones with internet access on a cart through the streets; through Weckert's activity, an otherwise unobstructed road on Google Maps would turn from green to red, indicating a blockage and leading the Google Maps navigation system to direct the car to a different route based on this fake blockage report. This fake blockage had a substantial impact on the real physical world. While Weckert's practice represents a seemingly successful intrusion into digital control, the result is proof that this "digital wall" is unbreakable.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

The depiction of 'online body' images in internet art unveils the intricate relationship between individual and collective identity in contemporary society. Through the reorganization and presentation of user-generated content, the artworks by the mentioned artists mirror the phenomena of surveillance, self-exposure, and collective storytelling prevalent in modern society. These pieces not only capture personal expressions but also underscore the impact of technological and cultural algorithms on image creation. Through an examination of these artworks, we attain a deeper comprehension of the processes of production and consumption of body images in contemporary society, shedding light on broader social and cultural phenomena such as mass production, surveillance, and the erosion of individuality. This exploration emphasizes the role of contemporary internet art as a profound reflection on societal structures and personal identity.