On Anti-Surveillance Mindfulness

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Surveillance has become a ubiquitous feature of everyday life in America. Cameras watch us from businesses and homes, from bus stops, from cars, from traffic lights. Bluetooth trackers ping our smartphones as we pass by, mapping our movements. The phones themselves illuminate our paths through society by continuously pinging cell towers, providing our cell providers our location data, information that is only a subpoena away, if that. In countless ways, we've been made to both passively accept and actively participate in our own surveillance. This vast complex of surveillance doesn't just gather information about us, it also shapes our behaviors, temperaments, and ways of moving through the world. Surveillance molds us down to the level of subjective, sensory, embodied experience. At that same level we can begin to shake off its hold on us and reclaim ourselves. For that, I am offering a practice I'm calling "anti-surveillance mindfulness," a form of walking meditation that builds mindful awareness of surveillance cameras. This practice, if taken up consistently, opens onto a broader project of transforming our relationship to the places we live in, a project that itself naturally blossoms into materially transforming public space, as self expands to world in the moment-by-moment practice of mindfulness.

Anti-Surveillance Mindfulness

Readers may or may not be familiar with the Panopticon. Designed by 18th century English liberal Jeremy Bentham, the Panopticon was a model for an institutional building designed so that a single prison guard can watch all the inmates from a central watch tower. The inmates, meanwhile, cannot tell whether or not they are being watched, and therefore could be watched at any moment. To quote Bentham:

> The more constantly the persons to be inspected are under the eyes of the persons who should inspect them, the more perfectly will the purpose of the establishment have been attained. (…) This being impossible, the next thing to be wished for is, that, at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should *conceive* himself to be so.

A lot has changed since the 1700's, but the disciplinary paradigm of surveillance has remained the same. If anything, it has expanded beyond specific institutions to encompass much of society.

There are cameras everywhere, and we are being watched, and while we are aware of this, we tend to see it as normal and unremarkable, an inevitability we must resign ourselves to. Consciousness of being surveilled fades into the background, becoming a constant assumption of

being watched that we internalize. This surveillance consciousness is running us all the more effectively because it is not distinct, because it is *un*conscious. That is why the first step in anti-surveillance mindfulness is becoming conscious of surveillance.

> Mindfulness is at the same time a means and an end, the seed and the fruit. When we practice mindfulness in order to build up concentration, mindfulness is a seed. But mindfulness itself is the life of awareness: the presence of mindfulness means the presence of life, and therefore mindfulness is also the fruit. — Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*

"Mindfulness" is a practice originating in various sects of Buddhism. The mindfulness practices and concepts I'm familiar with have largely been within the school of Zen Buddhism[1].

The classic mindfulness practice is watching the breath, and that is a great starting point. Take a breath in, the air entering through your nose, your stomach and chest softly expanding as you inhale. Then exhale through the mouth, the stomach and chest settling back down, gently exhaling for a little longer than your inhale. Repeat this several times, deepening your breaths slightly. From there, start to check in with your body. Notice how it feels to be sitting down, or to be standing if you are standing; notice how it feels to be holding this piece of paper, holding your phone, or looking at your computer, however it is that you are reading this.

The practice I am calling "anti-surveillance mindfulness" is a walking meditation, or a meditation performed however it is you get around. While walking or rolling on the sidewalk, first get in touch with your breath, as above. Then, begin to notice your surroundings: the buildings, the sky, the trees, the people, the sounds. Make note of the cameras that you see while walking around, on businesses, or Ring cameras on houses, cameras too on bus stops. Tesla cars all have cameras. Look at what angles these cameras are pointed in, if you can figure out where they're pointing—on some of the dome-shaped cameras, this isn't clear. Notice when you are in view of these various cameras; notice when you are not in view of cameras.

With this practice, surveillance goes from being a taken-for-granted, constant background of your subjectivity, to a distinct phenomenon that you are consciously aware of. When it fades into the background, it becomes a part of you—putting it into your conscious awareness makes it once again separate from you and your being.

Psychogeography

Coined by notorious mid-20th century French radical intellectuals, the Situationists, psychogeography is "[t]he study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behavior of individuals."[2] Anti-surveillance mindfulness naturally opens up onto a psychogeographical practice of rediscovering and remapping the places you live and move through. There are infinite things to discover about the alleyways, back streets, and odd corners of your city. You may walk through a certain block all the time, on your way to work or to the store, but have you ever really noticed how that block makes you *feel*? There are many possibilities latent in the streets, just waiting to be broken open by our awareness and creativity.

[1] Zen Buddhism is itself an umbrella term, containing lots of different approaches and cultural practices within it, some liberatory and some less so. "Why Anarchists Like Zen?" by Enrique Galván-Álvarez gives a useful sense of how internally contested the liberatory meaning of Buddhism and Zen is. For learning more about Zen and mindfulness, I recommend Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind by Shunryu Suzuki and The Miracle of Mindfulness by Thích Nhất Hạnh.

[2] "Definitions" from Internationale Situationniste #1

And importantly, once you start noticing when you are being video surveilled, you start noticing when you *aren't*. The extent of video surveillance in this society is formidable, but it is not total. There are gaps everywhere, sometimes quite large ones. Awareness of the gaps in surveillance opens up many opportunities for action. This practice transforms the experience of surveillance in everyday life from hardly an experience at all, a resigned acceptance of intrusion and control, to an access to a more present and engaged way of moving through the world, a game of mischief and evasion.

Creating a world without video surveillance is a big project, necessitating the wholesale abolition of this racial capitalist civilization, in a process of great societal transformation. There are many different aspects to that fight. I believe that reinhabiting our bodies through the breath and building a new relationship to the places we exist in can serve as a solid foundation for what may come.

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