



Book Review

Torin Monahan (2022) *Crisis Vision: Race and the Cultural Production of Surveillance*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

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Torin Monahan's *Crisis Vision: Race and the Cultural Production of Surveillance*, part of the Errantries series edited by Simone Browne, Deborah Cowen and Katherine McKittrick, is a critical review of critical surveillance art—art that has emerged as a response to the ever-expanding systems of surveillance now embedded in our lives. While aiming to critique and challenge issues of domination, oppression and inequality, surveillance art can (in)advertently contribute to cultural production of racialised and gendered viewpoints. Monahan's is a crucial and timely intervention into the cultural productions of surveillance, consolidating years of his scholarly work on surveillance art into interpretation of viewing subjects (Monahan 2018), anti-surveillance camouflage (Monahan 2015), and artistic disruptions of antiblack surveillance (Monahan 2020).

To unpack this layered idea of cultural productions of surveillance through surveillance art, Monahan introduces two theoretical concepts of *crisis vision* and *frames* through which artworks are analysed. For Monahan, *crisis vision* is an idea that reflects the sense of insecurity in the contemporary world, filtered through racialised visibility. For example, the idea of deploying surveillance make-up to dazzle surveillance cameras in public spaces may place a larger target on the backs of black and brown bodies who are already hyper-visible to law enforcement in a lot of the countries of the Global North. Paying drug-addicted sex workers US\$67 to create a permanent line tattoo on their bodies may highlight the social conditions of violence in which they exist, but is it not necessitated by those conditions. The goal of Monahan's work is not to engage in critiques of specific, individual artworks, but to reflect on the ways in which these artworks function as political performances that contribute to discourses on surveillance and inflect cultural understandings of crisis vision. Five artistic frames support this critical analysis of numerous artworks considered in the book—avoidance, transparency, complicity, violence and disruption.

The **avoidance** section (Chapter 1) considers countersurveillance designs and artworks that challenge the diminishing public. In reviewing the works of Leo Selvaggio, Danielle Baskin and a variety of surveillance camouflage techniques, Monahan argues that they provide 'hyper-individualised and consumer-oriented adaptations to undesired surveillance' (p. 38). While acknowledging the solidarity-building aspect of such **avoidance** works, Monahan argues that they further disadvantage, among others, the social 'Others' who are already hyper-visible in policed public spaces. The **transparency** section (Chapter 2) extends further the inquiry into surveillance art by looking at practices of surveillance archiving through documentation, simulation, and compilation. Using the works of Trevor Paglen, Josh Begley and Hasan Elahi (among others analysed) as



examples, Monahan demonstrates how surveillance archives can posit a counterstrategy to state and corporate surveillance. In this context, the opacity—not transparency—of these counter-archives becomes a response to challenging and questioning invasive state surveillance. The **complicity** section (Chapter 3) reviews works that draw upon opacity, illegibility, and participatory techniques to foster self-reflexivity and responsibility between the artworks and their viewers. Monahan’s analysis of certain artworks through the complicity frame effectively prompts viewers to develop crucial perspectives on surveillance. For example, Dries Depoorter’s artwork, *Jaywalking*, offers viewers the option to report an image of a genuine person jaywalking, captured on camera without their awareness. The artists of these works, however, are cautioned to be mindful of their own positions and avoid re-producing the neoliberal and racialised viewpoints they set off to challenge. The **violence** frame (Chapter 4) explores how to reveal the objectifying and exploitative dimensions of crisis vision, like a mirror reflecting the destructive elements of racialised crisis vision and allowing artists to confront the cruelty that surveillance can inflict. At the same time the **violence** frame has the capacity to further dehumanise the subjects it portrays through artists’ orientations and approaches. The last frame, **disruption** (Chapter 5), focuses on challenging authority and its sanctioned forms of racial violence through channelling community.



Image: Jakub Geltner’s Nest 06 sculpture in Sydney, analysed in ‘Complicity’ (Chapter 3)

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In the five art frame sections, Monahan skilfully intertwines various theoretical threads to construct a perspective on how critical surveillance art can strive to garner attention, not just for consumeristic and individualistic objectives, but to challenge the existing institutional dynamics that facilitate surveillance in the first place. Certainly, surveillance plays a crucial role in the functioning of crisis vision, ensuring the maintenance of a semblance of equality and democracy in the distribution of perceptions, while simultaneously enforcing inequality and exclusion. Hence, critical surveillance art can actively disrupt surveillance in locations where it has adverse racial and gender impacts. Nonetheless, in several areas of the book, the gender lens could have been explored in further depth along with racialisation, especially considering that critical gender scholarship has been incorporated throughout the manuscript. As Lisa Bowleg (2013: 754) observes in her intersectional scholarship on the experiences of black queer men, ‘once you’ve blended the cake, you can’t take the parts back to the main ingredients.’

In the first comprehensive scholarly inquiry of its kind, Monahan’s *Crisis Vision: Race and the Cultural Production of Surveillance* provides readers with the conceptual tools to unravel the *frames* through which surveillance art attempts to approach and disrupt *crisis vision* and to evaluate whether surveillance art is successful in its mission to tackle issues of domination, oppression and inequality. Critical surveillance art has long been considered an important part of surveillance

scholarship due to its ability to grab and mobilise attention of the broader public. For example, the global Surveillance Studies Network (2024) that facilitates surveillance scholarship also provides surveillance art grants, prizes and runs an *Arts Forum* section in the connected *Surveillance & Society* journal. Critical surveillance art risks re-producing the same subjectivities that it aims to oppose, without challenging the *status quo* of unwanted surveillance.

The contribution of Monahan's *Crisis Vision: Race and the Cultural Production of Surveillance* to the surveillance studies body of work is unique in its line of inquiry and the theoretical tools that it gifts to the intersectional field of surveillance studies scholars and artists. In the words of the author, the purpose of the book is 'not about watching the watchers, dyadic resistance, or a retreat into privacy. Instead, it is about securing spaces for collective existence without being categorised and sorted, without being atomised and diminished' (p.146).

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