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Watching and Being Watched:
Foucauldian Readings of Surveillance in Contemporary Art

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Abstract

This research investigates how artists across different periods, with a particular focus on contemporary art, engage with and visually articulate the concept of "surveillance" considering Michel Foucault's theorization of surveillance and power. It addresses the lack of a coherent, theory-grounded account of how surveillance and its associated power structures are represented in visual art, especially when interpreted through a Foucauldian lens. Adopting a qualitative, interpretive methodology, the research analyzes how artists incorporate surveillance into their practices to express their distinct perspectives, motivations, and aesthetic and technical choices,

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

and to reveal both explicit and implicit meanings embedded in contemporary artworks. The research highlights the intricate entanglement of art and surveillance as a site of far-reaching social implications, showing how contemporary art moves beyond mere depiction of observation to critically interrogate the social construction of surveillance and the disciplinary logic of the panopticon. The findings demonstrate that artists have integrated complex issues of surveillance into their work in ways that produce multilayered examinations of power structures, personal agency, and individual impact, weaving visual narratives that connect different historical and artistic contexts. By employing diverse media and innovative techniques, contemporary artists continue to pose a sustained challenge to the oppressive dynamics of panoptic surveillance in contemporary society.

Keywords: *Surveillance, Panopticon, Power Relations, Discipline, Visual Culture, Foucauldian Framework.*

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

Introduction

Artistic liberty collides with surveillance's constraints within the realm of the arts. The conjunction prompts critical discourse on the role of art within society and raises questions regarding longstanding social standards (Baarle et al., 2018). Reflective of societal intricacies, art has historically served as a mirror. Surveillance of artworks falls within this scope as well. It encompasses the central idea of observation, regulation, and the underlying dynamics of contemporary existence, and captures a multifaceted perspective on existing times (Brighenti, 2010). Using surveillance's visually compelling language, artists examine how these violate traditions and existing societal and social norms to reshape relationships.

An illustration of the integration of monitoring into artistic works is provided by Banksy's "*Security Guard*" piece, featuring a guard intensely focused on his mobile device while disregarding his environment (Figure 1). The piece encapsulates the paradox of modern surveillance; despite feeling observed, those intended to monitor become preoccupied with diversions (Cai et al., 2021). Intrigued by the ironies and contradictions of a society fixated on surveillance, Bansky creates art that prompts reflection.

Figure 1 - Banksy, *Security Guard with Koons Dog*, 2010.
Image source: https://banksyexplained.com/security-guard-with-koons-dog-may-2010/

Likewise, Trevor Paglen investigates "*The Invisible*" realm via his visual artistry, encompassing clandestine topographies uncovered through far-reaching imagery (Ceven et al.,

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

2021) (Figure 2). Through his "*Limit telephotography*" series, Paglen invites the audience to confront the disturbing prospect of covert observation by authority figures, challenging the collective conscience regarding this hidden scrutiny without explicit consent.

Figure 2 – Trevor Paglen, *They Watch the Moon*, 2010.
Image source: https://paglen.studio/2020/04/22/limit-telephotography/

The digital era expansion has led to virtual surveillance's rise. An example of modern art surveillance is the interactive pieces by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, which highlight this transformation (Cho, 2020) (Figure 3). By pinpointing 33 questions each minute, he represents how the existing surroundings constantly transmit knowledge. Through his work, Lozano-Hemmer sheds light on the various faces of surveillance during the modern period, where cyber presence defines personality traits or self-expression (Furst et al., 2020). Beyond simple criticism, surveillance art has the power to effect change through empowerment. The documentary blends factual intelligence leaks with cinematic storytelling, shedding light on events like Edward Snowden's groundbreaking disclosure regarding extensive state monitoring (Louise, 2020). The tensions between privacy and safety elicit thoughtful debate regarding the subtle distinction separating safeguards and intrusiveness.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

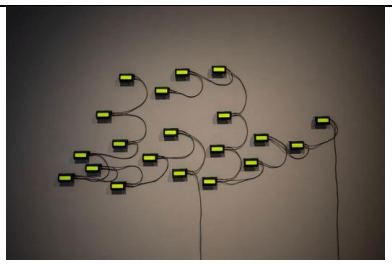

Figure 3 – Atelier Lozano-Hemmer, *33 Questions per Minute*, 2000.
Image source: https://www.lozano-hemmer.com/33_questions_per_minute.php

Art's complex intertwining with surveillance demands moral analysis. Considering face recognition and tech advancements, there arises debate on agreement, discretion, and individual liberty. Fashion and resilience merge in creations by artists such as Adam Harvey, who confront these challenges head-on through innovative designs blocking facial recognition technology (Manokha, 2018) (Figure 4). Art holds significant promise as a spark for meaningful conversation and imagining alternate forms of surveillance resistance. Interwoven with the themes of surveillance and performance lies this artistic medium's unique dynamism.

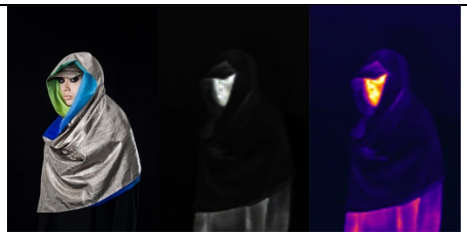

Figure 4 – Adam Harvey, *Anti-Drone Hijab*, 2013.
Image source: https://adam.harvey.studio/stealth-wear/

As exemplified by "*Evidence Locker*," Jill Magid possesses a unique artistic voice worth recognizing. A bold move, Magid sought entry into the revered architect Luis Barragan's archive, kept by a Swiss company (Mendes et al., 2018). Transforming his ash into a diamond, she proposed

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

it as currency to retrieve the records (Figure 5). Art, through Magid's bold example, daringly confronts and subverts surveillance systems, questioning the dominance they hold.

Figure 5 – Jill Magid, *Evidence Locker*, 2004.
Image source: https://www.jillmagid.com/projects/evidence-locker-2

Essentially, surveillance in art examines the nuanced relationship between watching and creativity, challenging conventions and encouraging contemplation. Artists' ongoing investigation of these themes allows society to reflect on the impacts of continuous observation, privacy loss, and striking a balance between preserving and restricting individual autonomy (Moss & Kate, 2019). Under heightened examination, artists harness their craft to examine social norms through art, fostering thoughtful self-reflection and collaboration toward building more cohesive communities.

The research clarifies the role of art as a critical arena for visualizing and contesting surveillance; connects art history with Foucauldian theory; and offers a synthesized reading of key artworks that expose the politics of seeing and being seen.

Foucault's Idea of Surveillance

Michel Foucault's idea of surveillance, as articulated in his seminal work "*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*" (1975), sheds light on how contemporary civilizations operate. Beyond just visual monitoring, Foucault illuminates how surveillance enforces discipline,

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
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influencing conduct, morals, and organizational structures (O'Neill, 2023). Examining the history of punishment as the foundation, Foucault discusses surveillance. Through this comparison, he brings attention to their striking differences. The switch illustrates shifts in the means through which power operates; where Foucault advocates for disciplinary measures and monitoring, authority wields its influence in contemporary society.

The *Panopticon* refers to a theoretical model originally conceived by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century as a central metaphor for understanding modern systems of power and surveillance (Sus, 2025). Rather than functioning merely as an architectural design for a prison, the Panopticon operates as a symbolic mechanism through which individuals internalize the possibility of constant observation, resulting in self-discipline and the internalization of authority (Manokha, 2018). In the context of contemporary art, the Panopticon is frequently employed as a critical framework for analyzing artworks that engage with visibility, control, surveillance, and the condition of being watched, particularly within societies shaped by digital technologies and pervasive monitoring systems (Brighenti, 2010).

Through this fictional structure, Foucault conveys his theories surrounding continuous monitoring. Conceived by Bentham, the design presents a spiral arrangement of holding cells surrounding a core observation post (Sacco et al., 2021) (Figure 6). A persistent feeling of self-monitoring results from the inability to determine if observed always. Through his analysis, Foucault demonstrates how societal monitoring reaches far beyond traditional notions of imprisonment to encompass various sectors of society. Discipline seeks uniformity and obedience to accepted guidelines by establishing a framework of predictable actions. Surveillance is vital in fostering discipline (Wang, 2021). The prospect of being observed, real or merely conjured, influences behavior, causing people to internalize social standards and govern themselves, accordingly, acting as their monitors. A dedication to rules and personal restraint guarantees institutional effectiveness and societal stability.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

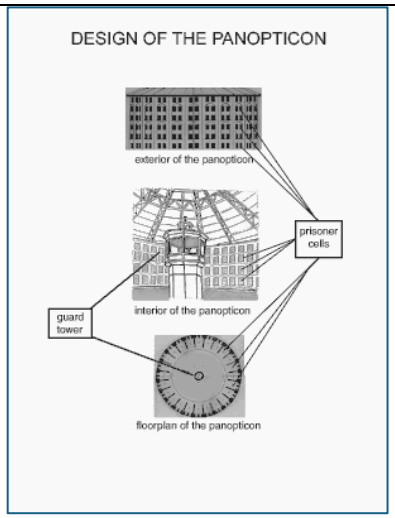

Figure 6 – Flow chart of the Panopticon design by Jeremy Bentham, 1791.

Image source: https://circlesallthewaydown.blogspot.com/2010/10/childrens-theatre-and-panopticon-tied.html

In addition, he notes the extensive reach of monitoring in today's culture. The phenomenon transcends surface-level examination and interacts intricately with administrative routines, vertical hierarchy models, and sophisticated monitoring tools (Manokha, 2018). According to Foucault, such societies prioritize constant supervision and the routine adoption of accepted conventions. Moreover, he examines the dynamics between these two concepts. Monitoring individuals provide valuable information on their conduct, likes, and predilections (Mendes et al., 2018). Having grasped this information, organizations subsequently manipulate and direct individuals. Precise manipulations allow power to sift through the knowledge of individuals for the optimal rule.

Unraveling the intricate influence network in contemporary culture, Michel Foucault's notion of supervision illuminates how vigilant observation shapes conduct. Discipline's toolkit includes surveillance, which regulates actions, upholds societal conventions, and strengthens existing values (Moss & Kate, 2019). Exploring the panopticon model and its connection to disciplinary control offers insight into how monitoring influences modern existence, illuminating interactions among authority, information, and personal autonomy.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

Problem & Questions

The research addresses the lack of a coherent, theory-grounded account of how surveillance and its associated power structures are represented in visual art, especially when interpreted through a Foucauldian lens:

- How have artists visually represented surveillance across different periods?
- In what ways do these representations reflect or critique Foucauldian power structures?
- What strategies do artists use to challenge or expose the Panopticon gaze?

Surveillance's role in shaping cultural expression has reached critical proportions; artists must acknowledge this factor to produce relevant works. Due to advancing technologies and ubiquitous monitoring systems, artists play an increasingly vital part in commenting on culture and societal norms (O'Neill, 2023). It allows them to spark thoughtful critique and give voice to unheard concerns about constant scrutiny's far-reaching consequences. A consequence of diminishing personal privacy, unbalanced institutional power dynamics, and moral conflicts inherent to monitoring activities emerge. Due to modern technology's hyper-connectivity, private life invasions and information control surpass earlier standards (Sacco et al., 2021). Incorporating surveillance within their work highlights such violations, increasing cognizance regarding privacy's depletion and inspiring viewers to ponder safety's cost against individuality.

The subtle nature of surveillance creates unequal dynamics in power exchange. Through their work, artists reshape the dynamics by revealing underlying systems of authority. These interventions provoke viewers to consider the extent of authority and any possible manipulation or excesses (Sacco et al., 2021). Investigating surveillance's potential consequences through creative expression allows people to scrutinize sensitive moral topics. Utilizing their creativity, artists invite the audiences to delve into the intricate ethical implications of surveillance, fostering open debate on the appropriate means of navigating this shifting social terrain (Wang, 2021). By

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

leveraging the power of surveillance in their work, artists are well-positioned to facilitate profound social examination. It is crucial to exploit art and surveillance, combining everyday elements and encouraging inquiry into surveillance's ramifications (Baarle et al., 2018). The conversation can revolutionize how people and societies comprehend, challenge, and restructure an environment continually growing in scope and intensity.

Objectives & Scope

- To analyze how artists incorporate surveillance themes in their artworks.
- To interpret these artworks through a Foucauldian lens of power, discipline, and observation.
- To clarify the socio-cultural implications of art that engages surveillance.

Artists explore the intricate relationship between creativity and monitoring through the convergence of art and surveillance. The review investigates how artists draw upon surveillance through diverse mediums, examining Michel Foucault's seminal theory (Baarle et al., 2018). Fifteen articles on art and surveillance are explored in this engagement's ethical, societal, and creative aspects, offering fresh perspectives on how artists maneuver through the surveillance terrain and contribute meaningfully to intellectual debates.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

Artists have long engaged with themes of observation and control, but surveillance becomes especially explicit in the late twentieth century with the rise of video, CCTV, and digital technologies. Early surveillance art experiments by figures such as Bruce Nauman used closed-circuit video to implicate the viewer, collapsing the distinction between watcher and watched in ways that resonate with Foucault's disciplinary gaze. These practices echo Foucault's account of the Panopticon as a model in which the possibility of constant observation produces self-regulating subjects. (Sus, 2025)

In more recent decades, artists including Ai Weiwei, Hasan Elahi, and Julia Scher have developed practices that directly foreground infrastructures of monitoring and state power. Ai Weiwei's projects around cameras and police attention expose asymmetries between state visibility and individual vulnerability, enacting a critique of the one-way gaze characteristic of panoptic power. Hasan Elahi s self-tracking and continuous self-disclosure invert the logic of secret surveillance, turning sousveillance into a strategy that devalues the information monopoly on which disciplinary control depends, in line with Foucauldian notions of diffuse power and normalization. (Wang, 2021)

Digital-age artists such as Trevor Paglen, Hito Steyerl, and Shu Lea Cheang extend these concerns to algorithmic vision, data infrastructures, and biometric regimes. Works like Cheang s installation 3x3x6 and Paglen's projects on AI image training reveal how contemporary observation systems embody and reproduce power, updating the panoptic model for a networked environment. Through these practices, contemporary art both visualizes and disrupts the mechanisms of surveillance that Foucault theorizes, exposing how they shape subjectivity, space, and social relations. (Cocciolillo, 2025)

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

Literature Review

The extensive contributions of Michel Foucault, especially his influential theory of *Panopticism*, remain essential to examinations related to monitoring and dominative arrangements. In Foucault's metaphorical construct of a circular prison with a centrally located guard, one finds a representation of the ubiquitous gaze and self-regulation bred by scrutiny (Baarle et al., 2018). The studied works investigate how artists innovatively challenge conventional notions by commenting on existing monitoring procedures.

- Building on the work of Foucault, Baarle et al. (2018) investigate how his philosophy might shape moral learning in a distinctive institutional environment. Focusing on solid accounts, the article sheds insight into adapting Foucault's concepts beyond traditional settings (Baarle et al., 2018). The article finds that artists establish creative stimulus in unexpected settings by examining how surveillance affects diverse aspects of life.
- Initially proposed by Brighenti (2010), "Surveillance" illustrates the convergence of artistry and scrutiny. Through their work, artists challenge the hazy divide between representation and artistic interpretation (Brighenti, 2010). By employing this idea, artists gain access to a theoretical structure that allows them to investigate how surveillance impacts collective conduct and thought processes, ultimately imbuing their artworks with more profound cultural relevance.
- In their study, Cai et al. (2021) delve into the synchronous growth of cultural heritage preservation and travel, highlighting the monitoring gadgets' drawbacks inside historical landmarks. Using their talent, artists navigate this conundrum by fostering works that interrogate the delicate balance between conserving history's treasures and respecting secrecy, innocence, and sincerity (Cai et al., 2021). Investigating how extensive surveillance affects various cultures and timeframes inspires artistic thought about its far-reaching effects.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

- Through examination by Ceven et al. (2021), the school's use of panopticon technology contributes to focus. This text invites artists to examine the effect of monitoring on educational settings (Ceven et al., 2021). Visual representations of a school's power structures help spark conversations about privacy and self-determination within institutional environments. In her 2020 work, Cho investigates how contemporary artists grapple with issues of privacy invasion and resistance through creative expression (Cho, 2020). The study findings show that artists investigate how surveillance technology intrudes upon individuals' autonomy, stressing the need for independence and liberty. Examining students' reasons behind seeking art education, Furst et al. (2020) bring forth the value of art in the modern era. The research gives artists insight into how they influence societal conversations via their creations. Artists expand upon existing conversations by weaving surveillance elements into their work (Furst et al., 2020).
- In her 2020 study, Louise investigates how surveillance ties into people's sense of security, focusing on the ambiance of this relationship within art (Louise, 2020). By employing atmospheric approaches, artists prompt introspection and empathy concerning monitoring complexities. The approach enables artists to portray the psychological effects of living, where everything is constantly watched.
- Furst et al.'s (2020) work investigates student opinions regarding arts teaching and uncovers essential data points on art education. Their study underscores its value across conventional domains highlighting art's unconventional utility within education (Furst et al., 2020). Participating in training focused on art enhances cognitive abilities necessary to evaluate social mores, like accepting or rejecting methods employed during monitoring. The atmosphere fosters artists' ability to question prevailing views regarding continuous surveillance. These works prompt society to examine the moral and societal ramifications of monitoring in today's world.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

- Louise (2020) uses her creative voice to illuminate the intricate dynamics of emotions arising from surveillance experiences. Through their creations, artists produce environments designed to elicit empathy by evoking a deep understanding of how psychological phenomena manifest in human behavior under surveillance (Louise, 2020). As these emotional bonds spark discussions, they challenge assumptions regarding observation. Artists stimulate dialogues about intrusive digital oversight tactics by invoking empathetic feelings within the audience and society.
- Manokha illuminates the self-disciplinary dimension of surveillance culture, drawing from Foucault's seminal works. Internalized social standards become an effective means of artistic critique. By embracing this notion, artists craft compositions that question the mundane nature of surveillance and inspire inner examination (Manokha, 2018). Self-examination gains momentum through artistic practices, allowing the audience to evaluate their conduct under close observation. By indulging in inner exploration, society members pave the way toward revolutionary evolution and heightened attention to surveillance techniques.
- In 2018, Mendes and colleagues highlighted artists' innovative application of video surveillance technology, resulting in unique works focused on environmental consciousness. Through this analysis, society uncovers the inventive possibilities of surveillance systems regarding creativity (Mendes et al., 2018). Artists harness surveillance technology to produce pieces that surpass their initial meaning, inviting spectators to reflect on creative expression and ecological conservation. Using surveillance tech in art opens up conversations about society's values, environmental preservation, and adaptable digital resources for progress.
- In 2019, Moss and Kate investigated how surveillance affects public areas. The analysis highlights how surveillance affects social order and city dynamics. Through exploring this topic, artists sparked debates regarding public areas, individual liberty, and social connections (Moss & Kate, 2019). Public spaces become arenas where artists provoke dialogue on

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

expanding societal definitions of protection versus independence via thought-provoking pieces.

- O'Neill (2023) explores the intersection of art and surveillance, revealing how artists harness technology for insightful social analysis. Art's impact allows for a drastic shift in surveillance discussion. Artists have transformed former spy cameras and sensors into channels for societal critique, urging observers to self-examine privacy concerns (O'Neill, 2023). Engagement on this level increases knowledge and stimulates personal accountability and communal commitment, ultimately benefiting the larger community.
- According to Sacco et al.'s (2021), these spaces represent intersections between social inclusion, cultural diversity, and communal progress during city restoration. Artists receive inspiration through this principle to develop distinctively unique ideas about society's operating system while under scrutiny (O'Neill, 2023). Transforming public settings into heterotopic worlds via art, visionaries provoking scrutiny, and inspiring novel thoughts and collaborative experiences. Artistic efforts enable urban settings to serve as arenas where people debate and work toward improvement. On the other hand, through her lens (Wang, 2021), the power play inherent in observations becomes starkly apparent. Artists invite viewers to participate directly, sparking introspection regarding consent to surveillance. Developing such citizens through this method enables them to comprehensively understand and confront modern monitoring systems (Wang, 2021). Artists reveal covert forces by exposing latent energy relationships and confronting dominant frameworks while prompting onlookers to consider the far-reaching political effects of observation methods.

The analyzed pieces underscore artists' diverse approaches when including the notion of surveillance within their artworks, inspired by Foucault's insights. Tapping into various backgrounds and viewpoints allows artists to subvert social conventions, spark meaningful debate, and elicit potent feelings (Cai et al., 2021). By creating pieces illuminating the consequences of

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

surveillance in modern life, artists advance a necessary discourse that secures individual rights and upholds moral guidelines during a period marked by growing supervision.

Synthesizing insights from various perspectives, this review highlights art's significant role in embracing surveillance concepts pioneered by Foucault. Artists harness educational tools, sensory encounters, and repurposed monitoring devices to elicit profound thought processes, stir feelings, and prompt dialogues transcending traditional art boundaries (Baarle et al., 2018). Through these dialogues, social conventions are examined, stimulating thoughtfulness and civic involvement among members of society. Through their creative endeavors, artists actively shape public discourse about surveillance while encouraging meaningful consideration of its impact on individual lives and communities.

Methodologies

The research employs a qualitative and interpretive content analysis of artworks and texts, and a close reading of artworks through Foucauldian concepts of observation, discipline, and power. The methodology outlined herein explores the approach used to investigate how art has embraced surveillance through Michel Foucault's theoretical framework. The study employs qualitative and interpretive approaches offering a holistic investigation into how artists interact with surveillance topics and deriving valuable insights through an extensive review of existing published works.

The study adopted a qualitative methodology to gain profound insight into how artists blend surveillance with their creativity, illuminating their distinct viewpoints, driving forces, and expressive techniques (Ceven et al., 2021). This design illuminated the far-reaching consequences of entwined art and surveillance through intricate visualizations and analyses, providing deep knowledge of how they impact society. The study strived to expose underlying structures and the rich tapestry they form.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

Discussion and Analysis

Surveillance in Contemporary Art

Using surveillance as a focal point, many artists across time have explored the complex dynamics between control and autonomy within societies. In an expansive scope spanning century, artistic representation has grappled with the keen eye of authority (Baarle et al., 2018). Even today, surveillance is a persistent theme, wherein artists seek to illuminate the profound implications of constant electronic supervision for the collective psyche. Artists' creations illustrate how they employ surveillance as an instrument for self-examination and insight via historical perspective.

A Brief History of Surveillance in Art

Artists have been acutely aware of how power and control interplay for ages. The Middle Ages and Renaissance saw the rise of images representing monarchs with godlike knowledge, exercising dominion over their populace and environment alike (Cai et al., 2021). Through this acclaimed piece, "*The Garden of Earthly Delights*," Hieronymus Bosch etches his unconventional imagination into history, featuring a baffling scene observed by ethereal guards (Figure 7).

Figure 7 – Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1490.

Image source: https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-garden-of-earthly-delights-triptych/02388242-6d6a-4e9e-a992-e1311eab3609

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

An eye that recalls a watchful look denotes divine vigilance and ethical deliberation. Artists were intrigued by Bentham's metaphorical portrayal of the Panopticon during this period, causing them to explore the idea of uninterrupted monitoring (Cho, 2020). Goya's painting "*The Third of May 1808*" captures a chilling instance of authority imposing itself upon the weak while a central figure oversees the activity, forecasting the structure of the Panopticon. Likewise, Orwell's "1984" literature work exposed the alarming prospects of continuous observation, motivating visionaries to grapple with the insidious effects of pervasive monition.

Figure 9 – Francisco Goya, *The Third of May,*1808.
Image source: https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-3rd-of-may-1808-in-madrid-or-the-executions/5e177409-2993-4240-97fb-847a02c6496c

Therefore, authorities were commonly rendered as all-seeing icons within artworks. In the past, works of art customarily showed leaders, divinity, or allegorical representations governing with authority. Within the artworks, fostering awareness of every action taken or decision made under His careful observation (Moss & Kate, 2019). Goya's painting presents the piercing spectacle of authority overcoming weakness, with the focal character encapsulating the all-seeing nature of the panopticon guardian.

Modern Surveillance

The increased presence of technology and growing state interest led to significant evolutions within the artist community's understanding of observation during this era. By blending

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

distinct methods and tools, artists investigated the effects of persistent monitoring during this timeframe (Sacco et al., 2021). For example, in 1966, Andy Warhol created "*Silver Clouds*," inviting visitors into a unique domain where they felt observed yet engaged in something carefree (Figure 8).

Figure 8 – Andy Warhol, *Silver Clouds*, 1966.
Image source: https://www.brooksmuseum.org/exhibitions/andy-warhol-silver-clouds

Merging elements of perception art and surveillance, an example of outstanding artists during this era included Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci. By presenting this video loop, Nauman challenges the audience's understanding of ethical assessments (Furst et al., 2020) (Figure 9). Throughout "*Following Piece*" (Figure 10), Acconci delved into roles of being self-surveillance while carefully monitoring unidentified persons amidst open territories; these fostered reflections concerning personal privacies lines.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

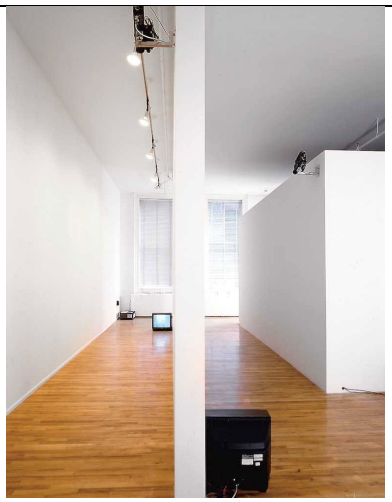

Figure 9 – Bruce Nauman, *Going Around the Corner Piece with Live and Taped Monitors,* 1970.
Image source: https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/bruce-nauman/exhibition-guide

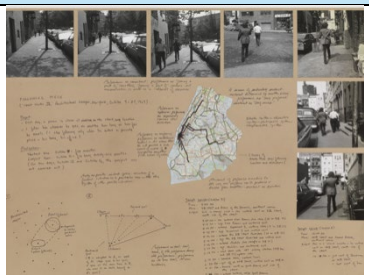

Figure 10 – Vito Acconci, *Following Piece,* 1969.
Image source: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/146947

Surveillance in the Digital Age

As technology advanced, debates on surveillance took unexpected turns. Amidst the omnipresent digital scrutiny, artists produced pieces that dissect its far-reaching effects. The transformation of LED signs into eerie monitoring stations by Jenny Holzer reveals the current world's delicate balance between technological progress and being watched constantly (Wang, 2021) (Figure 11). Acclaimed photographer Trevor Paglen ventured far beyond visible horizons by plunging headfirst into the shadowy world of spying and combat missions before recording

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

eerily ambiguous panoramas with his apparatus (Fig. 2). By depicting a cloaked satellite transfixed by the moon's gentle glow, this artist stirred the audience's curiosity about the concealed machinations overhead.

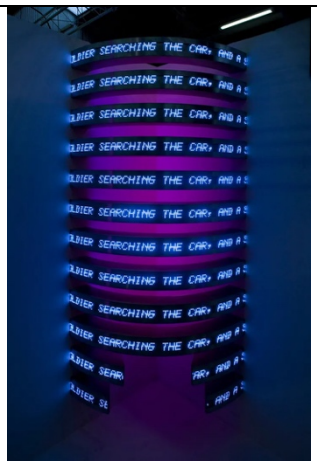

Figure 11 – Jenny Holzer, *Thorax*, 2008.
Image source: https://www.thebroad.org/art/jenny-holzer/thorax

Historically, artists have effectively employed the concept of surveillance to create compelling stories that illuminate cultural perspectives, challenge authority figures, and foster a greater appreciation for human nature (Cai et al., 2021). Past and present, artistic renderings of vigilant leaders form a vibrant fabric tracing the complex interplay between scrutiny, command, and individual initiative. Amidst the increasing prevalence of surveillance technology, artists hold a vital position in framing public discussion (Ceven et al., 2021). Their unique viewpoints illuminate how individuals might successfully negotiate these intricate matters. Reflective of societal hopes, fears, and subtleties, artists have long functioned as culture's barometer. Artists have long found inspiration in the complex web of surveillance, exploring various dimensions of control and inspection. Across various eras, including medieval times and modern digital contexts (Furst et al., 2020). Artists have leveraged the theme of surveillance to question authoritative structures, analyze societal conventions, and stimulate deep introspection.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

With technology advancing and digital observation on the rise, contemporary artists are again drawn more deeply into this realm of exploration. Mediums used by artists conjure introspective works that scrutinize viewer agency alongside issues of private integrity loss and continuous observation's moral repercussions (Manokha, 2018). Artists continue to play a pivotal part in shining light on, questioning, and navigating the labyrinthine terrain of constant monitoring in today's world.

Artists as Subjects of Their Surveillance

A compelling phenomenon exists whereby artists simultaneously observe and participate in the creation process, casting themselves in dual roles as observers and agents. A groundbreaking methodology illuminates the nuanced connection between perception, creativity, and bodily sensations within the context of surveillance (Moss & Kate, 2019). Using various media and approaches, creatives have successfully employed self-examination to break molds, inspire profound consideration, and generate meaningful interactions that obfuscate traditional roles encompassing their audiences and viewed subjects.

By placing herself under the microscope of observation in "*Rhythm*," Marina Abramović blazed a trail for artists to examine themselves (Figure 12). Within this artistic display, Abramović remained stationary for six hours within a gallery setting while providing a nearby table laden with various items spanning from a mere feather to a heavily loaded firearm (Louise, 2020). By allowing them to interact with her, she became both observer and observed simultaneously. Highlighting the potency and moral parameters of observation, this experiment showed how simple it was for passive viewers to transform into willing participants.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

Figure 12 – Marina Abramović, *Rhythm,* 1974.
Image source: https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/243/3118

Examining how artists govern themselves within their artistic domain reveals intriguing intersections between self-control and imaginative output. By combining self-imposed constraints with detailed recordkeeping, Teh-ching Hsieh's artwork is an example that fully manifests the concept of "*One-Year Performance*"(Figure 13). Applying Foucault's ideas, one finds that self-monitoring becomes more prevalent when one realizes others observe them closely (Baarle et al., 2018). Discipline and social commentary converge in Hsieh's creative endeavor, which serves as a testament to the power of vigilance.

Figure 13 – Teh-ching Hsieh, *One-Year Performance*, 2009.
Image source: https://www.moma.org/calendar/performance/322

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

Artists today find themselves empowered by technology to explore new depths of self-examination through previously inconceivable means. By incorporating this concept into "*Weiwei Cam*" (Fig. 14), the acclaimed Chinese artist and campaigner Weiwei demonstrated his insight in facing government spying; he placed cams within his digs, thereby offering remote spectators an unfiltered look into his routine through online feed (O'Neill, 2023). His move reassigned his autonomy regarding personal monitoring while simultaneously revealing the oppressive aspect of governmental scrutiny. Through his form of self-monitoring, Weiwei demonstrated how art could challenge established authority.

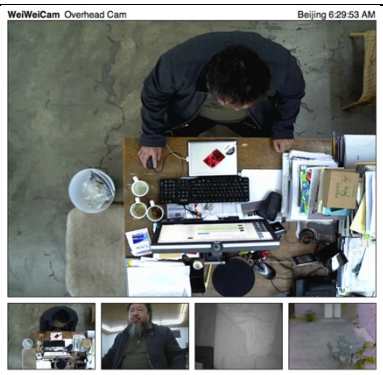

Figure 14 – Ai Wei Wei, *Weiwei Cam*, 2012.
Image source: https://avantarte.com/insights/articles/ai-weiwei-under-surveillance

By pushing beyond the limits of conventional privacy, "*The Address Book*" by Sophie Calle is an artistic example that probes deep into realms of personal connection, distrust, and fascination (Figure 15). In Paris, while discovering a lost address book, Calle pursued gathering information about the owner by reaching out directly to people named inside (Ceven et al., 2021). As her study shifted toward the emotional terrain, she witnessed how private spaces could crumble beneath unexpected intrusions. Through her artwork, Calle encourages visitors to reflect on the moral complexities of peering into people's private lives, thereby inspiring self-examination regarding their dual positions as spectators and subjects.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

Figure 15 – Sophie Calle, *The Address Book,* 2012.
Image source: https://fraenkelgallery.com/shop/sophie-calle-the-address-book

Artists' introspection reflects a profound development in how they approach their craft while intertwining with contemporary culture. Creativity and novel approaches ignite dialogue about societal norms, shatter conventions and illuminate the intricate nature of individual impact with potent narratives and thoughtfully constructed media platforms (Brighenti, 2010). Through self-monitoring and control, artists present a reflective surface illuminating the delicate balance between observation, independence, and the ceaseless pursuit of personal expression. Artists uncover the intricate dimensions of surveillance through their diligent efforts of introspection; simultaneously, they illuminate its potential to catalyze profound shifts within individuals and society alike (Baarle et al., 2018).

The structure conceived by Bentham embodies a covert yet oppressive kind of monitoring, which compels people to adapt their actions via continual scrutiny. Artists strive towards liberation within artistic expression by breaking free from constraints imposed upon them, promoting autonomy through their craft, and inviting introspection regarding observation's influence over individuality (Mendes et al., 2018). Employing various art forms and innovative methods, they attempt to free themselves from the suffocating gaze of persistent scrutiny, providing counter-narratives of independence, rebellion, and personal strength.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

Subversion of Surveillance Norms

Shirin Neshat artistic portfolio vividly conveys the struggle against oppressive scrutiny, particularly in her celebrated series, where she captures the desire for emancipation with masterful technique. Through her work in "*Women of Allah*," (Figure 16), Neshat showcases enchanting pictures of covered ladies accompanied by Arabic characters. Poetry and literature yield cryptic messages; inscribed thoughts reveal hidden emotions (Moss & Kate, 2019). With each word carefully inscribed on her skin, Neshat effectively conveys the importance of retrieving control in a constantly watched society. These women break free from traditional gender roles imposed upon them through the observer's lens, defining themselves through self-expression.

Figure 16 – Shirin Neshat, *Women of Allah, 1994.*
Image source: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/486834

Amidst the technological advancements, acclaimed Chinese artist and humanitarian Weiwei strived unwaveringly to end the oppressive nature of the panopticon glare. By intentionally creating "*Dumbass*" (Figure 17), he expresses his desire to embrace surveillance. He intentionally exposed parts of his day-to-day existence to others by sharing pictures across social channels. Unveiling the inherent power relations in observation, this transparent approach reframes surveillance as an instrument for enhancing autonomy (O'Neill, 2023). By defying the state's efforts to suppress and shut him, Ai Weiwei converts observation into a means of opposition and activism, demonstrating how, by voluntarily exposing himself, an individual can reduce the observer's authority.

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

Figure 17 – Ai Wei Wei, *Dumbass*, 2013.
Image source: https://www.theguardian.com/music/video/2013/may/22/ai-weiwei-dumbass-music-video

Michelangelo Pistoletto disrupts the all-seeing eye's grasp in his "*Mirror Paintings*" series (Figure 18). Pistoletto integrates the audience through mirrored representations acting accordingly by challenging established powers of observation (Sacco et al., 2021). The 1967-piece merges ancient art form with present-day surveillance inviting the audience into this contrast. Through his art, Pistoletto gives agency back to the audience; through reflection, they redefine the act of looking inwards.

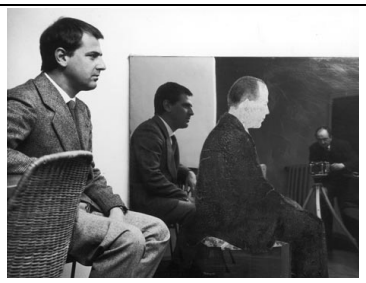

Figure 18 – Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Mirror Paintings,* 1962.
Image source: https://www.pistoletto.it/eng/crono04.htm

Hasan Elahi's innovative approach has surpassed traditional boundaries by defying the panoptic gaze. Determined to shed light on his situation, Elahi deliberately opened every aspect of his existence after wrongful inclusion in a terrorism database. Through the project "*Tracking Transience*", he publicly documents his whereabouts, actions, and minute particulars of life on a specialized web space (O'Neill, 2023) (Figure 19). By willingly undergoing continuous

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

observation, Elahi shifts control away from those watching him. His artworks implore the audience to meditate on the consequences of giving up individual autonomy regarding digital secrecy.

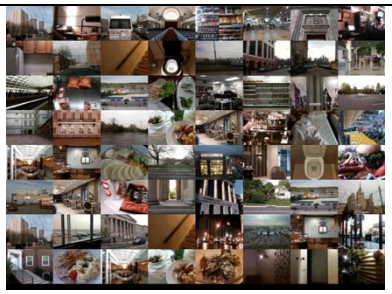

Figure 19 – Hasan Elahi, *Tracking Transience,* 2018.
Image source: https://history.siggraph.org/artwork/hasan-elahi-tracking-transience/

Yoko Ono's revolutionary 1964 artwork, "*Cut Piece*," represents a desire for independence from oversight (Figure 20). Amidst stillness, Ono's creation fosters viewer participation through material dissection. A transformation occurs mid-performance; the audience acts while the entertainer watches (Cai et al., 2021). The exposure reflects the fragile state common among individuals subjected to observation. Contrarily, her invitation subverts traditional roles, allowing her to assert agency and regain autonomy amidst scrutiny.

Figure 20 – Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1964.
Image source: https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/15/373

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

Artists assert their independence from prying eyes in constructing works that defy observation. Innovators, including these five examples, continue to break down barriers with novel techniques like art, creativity, and unwavering transparency, rigorously demanding greater independence, self-directed decision-making capabilities, and release from societal shackles (Manokha, 2018). Through interactions within the Panopticon's framework, artists challenge traditional roles between the viewer and the viewed; they present stories sparking counteraction, self-reflection, and fresh perspectives regarding how surveillance shapes the society's collective experience. Art's capacity to facilitate empowerment and self-expression gains significance considering the rising levels of observation around people and society (Brighenti, 2010).

Results

- Artists across historical periods and especially in modern/contemporary art have consistently embedded complex surveillance motifs that interrogate power, autonomy, and agency.
- The works do more than depict being watched; they unpack the social construction of surveillance and its internalization by subjects.
- Through varied visual and conceptual strategies, these artworks challenge the oppressive logic of the Panopticon, revealing how art can critique, subvert, and reimagine systems of observation and control.

Conclusion

Artists, throughout time, have seamlessly integrated complex surveillance themes into their works of art, providing a richly layered examination of power structures, personal choice, and individual influence (Baarle et al., 2018). Beyond simple observation lies the depth of their exploration into the social construct of surveillance; they weave thoughtful tales that bridge eras

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

and forms. By employing diverse techniques, art has maintained a persistent challenge to the oppressive glare of the Panopticon throughout history.

The daring step taken by those artistic trailblazers highlights their determination to defy social conventions and reassert agency regarding their artworks and personal existence. Transforming the relationship between power and privacy, these artist-voices embolden the audience to contemplate personal liberty, disciplined introspection, and the immense cognitive impact of watching themselves while being watched (Brighenti, 2010). By employing their physical form, actions, and personal journeys, these individuals push against social expectations, expose the mental depths of scrutiny, and prompt viewers to meditate on the close relationship between the monitor and the examined.

Artists aim to break free from the scrutiny of the omnipresent observer, achieving a momentous victory. Embracing novelty, groundbreaking methods, and artistic excellence, these trailblazers push boundaries, fostering spaces where individuals may exercise autonomy and express themselves freely (Cai et al., 2021). Through their creations, artists demonstrate how art can evade the stifling grasp of observation, freeing both themselves and viewers from the constraints of the Panopticon's authority. These creations demonstrate the limitless potential of the human soul and its tireless drive to restructure, realign, and revitalize the connection between scrutiny, imagination, and individual autonomy (O'Neill, 2023).

المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

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المجلة الإلكترونية الشاملة متعددة التخصصات
Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal (EIMJ)
العدد الواحد والتسعون - شهر (1) 2026
Issue 91, (1) 2026
ISSN: 2617-958X

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