

THE TECHNOLOGIST

# Watching the Watchers

Right under Big Brother's nose, artist-hackers are using surveillance images for their own purposes.

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Britain, somewhat proudly, has been crowned the most watched society in the world. The country boasts 4.2 million security cameras (one for every 14 people), a number expected to double in the next decade. A typical Londoner makes an estimated 300 closed-circuit television (CCTV) appearances a day, according to the British nonprofit Surveillance Studies Network, an average easily met in the short walk between Trafalgar Square and the Houses of Parliament. Public opinion on this state of affairs is generally positive, according to recent polls. And how useful is CCTV in busting bad guys? Not much, according to Scotland Yard. In terms of cost benefit, the enormous expenditure has done very little in actually preventing and solving crime.

Right under Big Brother's nose, a new class of guerrilla artists and hackers are commandeering the boring, grainy images of vacant parking lots and empty corridors for their own purposes. For about \$80 at any electronics supply store and some technical know-how, it is possible to tap into London's CCTV hotspots with a simple wireless receiver (sold with any home-security camera) and a battery to power it. Dubbed "video sniffing," the pastime evolved out of the days before broadband became widely available, when "war-chalkers" scouted the city for unsecured Wi-Fi networks and marked them with chalk using special symbols. Sniffing is catching on in other parts of Europe, as well as in New York and Brazil, spread by a small but globally connected community of practitioners. "It's actually a really relaxing thing to do on a Sunday," says Joao Wilbert, a master's student in interactive media, who slowly paces the streets in London like a treasure hunter, carefully watching a tiny handheld monitor for something to flicker onto the screen.

These excursions pick up obscure, random shots from the upper corners of restaurants and hotel lobbies, or of a young couple shopping in a housewares department nearby. Eerily, baby cribs are the most common images. Wireless child monitors work on the same frequency as other surveillance systems, and are almost never encrypted or secured.

Given that sniffing is illegal, some artists have found another way to obtain security footage: they ask for it, in a letter along with a check for £10. In making her film "Faceless," Austrian-born artist Manu Luksch made use of a little-known law, included within Britain's Data Protection Act, requiring CCTV operators to release a copy of their footage upon the request of anyone

captured on their cameras. "Within the maximum period of 40 days I received some recordings in my mail," says Luksch. "And I thought, Wow, that works well. Why not make a feature length, science-fiction love story?" After four years of performing, staging large dance ensembles in public atriums and submitting the proper paperwork, Luksch produced a haunting, beautifully choreographed film and social commentary, in which the operators have blocked out each and every performer's face, in compliance with Britain's privacy laws.

"The Duelists," one of the more well known CCTV movies, was shot by filmmaker David Valentine entirely with the security cameras in a mall in Manchester. He was able to cajole his way into the control booth for the project, but Valentine is also one of the people credited with having advanced video sniffing to an art form and social tool. He's collaborated with MediaShed, an organization based in Southend-on-Sea just outside London that works with homeless youth, using sniffing as a way to gain their interest and re-engage them with society. The organization has even received the blessing of the rather conservative local council.

In some cases video sniffing has morphed into a form of hacking, in which the sniffer does more than just watch. Using a transmitter strong enough to override the frequency that most cameras use, sniffers can hijack wireless networks and broadcast different images back to the security desk. MediaShed used the device to broadcast an Atari-style videogame animation of a spaceship flying over its town to unsuspecting security guards. A group of sniffers in Oldenburg, Germany have been devising a way to sniff and hijack all at once, using the cameras mounted behind the counters at fast-food joints to watch employees. They've broadcasted McDonald's to Burger King, Burger King to KFC, and so on.

Most sniffers, hijackers and artists using CCTV are critical of the present level of surveillance, but they're also interested in establishing a dialogue about what is typically a secretive arrangement. The ability to tap into wireless surveillance systems and take them over points out a flaw in the elaborate security apparatus that has evolved around us.

As anthropologists tell us, the act of observation changes what's being observed. Cameras "reorder the environment," says Graham Harwood, artistic director of the group Mongrel, which specializes in digital media. That's especially true of saturated London. Like "flash mobs" and "wifipicning," both large, spontaneous gatherings of people centered around communications technology, sniffing and hijacking could become the next high-tech social phenomenon. Of course, it will likely disappear quickly once the surveillance industry catches on to the shenanigans and beefs up its security. But the cameras will remain.

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