Resisting the Biopolitics of Techno-borders: Art and the Body in the Age of Digital Surveillance

Serena Di Maria
Department of Social Research and Cultural Studies
National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University

This paper examines the intersection of border politics, biopolitics, and artistic intervention in the age of advanced surveillance technologies and digital control. As modern borders expand beyond physical perimeters to become complex, multidimensional networks of surveillance, they increasingly target the human body to selectively control mobilities, while inscribing identities. Through analysis of two case studies—Hasan Elahi's *Tracking Transience* and Raul Gschrey's *Typical Inhabitants Series*—this study explores how contemporary artists critically engage with the pervasive influence of 'techno-borders.' Their artistic practices play a crucial role in exposing the biopolitical function of surveillance, using art to unveil the hidden mechanisms of control and to reclaim bodily autonomy. By seeking active interaction with their audiences, they also challenge viewers to question surveillance norms and disclose art's potential to advocate for more transparent and equitable systems of border governance. Finally, this paper probes the potential and limits of art as both a practice of resistance and a catalyst for public engagement with pressing issues of privacy, identity, and freedom in digitally controlled societies.

Keywords: border politics, digital surveillance, biopolitics, art, body

Introduction

In today's digital societies, borders continue to proliferate, whilst evolving in both form and function. This shift compels us to reimagine 'borders' beyond the conventional concept of sharp lines on a map or walls bisecting the landscape. Contemporary borders transcend their traditional two-dimensional configuration and emerge as 'thicker' entities capable of 'permeating everyday life' (Liu & Vaughan-Williams, 2014). Steven Graham, for instance, highlights the three-dimensional politics of borders —' above, below, and around' (2016, p. 3) — emphasizing the importance of vertical perspectives in the control of airspace, underground resources, and general surveillance practices. Beyond their characteristic as physically diffused, contemporary borders have also been described as 'operations' (Whitley, 2012, p. 12) or 'complex social institutions' (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 3). That is to say, borders increasingly appear as multifaceted structures that integrate logistical, architectural, and technological elements alongside social mechanisms, functioning ubiquitously in locations that transcend geographically fixed points.

Long before this recent scholarly shift, Paul Virilio foresaw a 'logistical' transformation of borders in his 1984 essay 'The Overexposed City,' where he examined how technological advances in communication and surveillance, combined with new architectural designs, transformed urban

spaces into highly monitored zones. Today, with technologies like facial recognition, fingerprint scanning, and geolocation, the monitoring of movement—alongside identification, inspection, and surveillance techniques—occurs at dispersed and often unpredictable locations. These borders, as Virilio suggests, are best viewed as multidimensional ‘networks’ that span various terrains and infrastructures (2008, p. 316), rather than as lines or perimeters that neatly divide an inside from the outside.

The mere fact that borders have evolved into increasingly sophisticated technologies does not imply that they should be exclusively understood as barriers that block or prevent movement across boundaries. As Mezzadra and Neilson caution, in a globalized world, borders perform ambivalent and highly selective functions: they facilitate and accelerate certain movements and flows while slowing down or halting others (2013, p. 7). Balibar further suggests that borders are 'polysemic,' providing different experiences to different people and holding varying meanings depending on whose perspective is considered (2002, p. 76). For example, the same border might grant freedom of circulation to some while serving as a hindrance for others, depending on factors like the type of passport one holds, which side of the border one is on, and, at times, financial status, occupation, or marital status.

The impact of advanced border/surveillance apparatuses on individual lives is particularly evident in the state control of migration. Technologies such as drones, cameras, digital databases, satellite imagery, AI, and sensor networks form a complex surveillance architecture that not only automates border control but also acts as a preemptive mechanism, hindering the mobility of 'undesirable' subjects before they can even reach the physical border. Even when migrants succeed in crossing, they are often subjected to biometric registration and screening against national and international databases, which can later facilitate deportation processes.

As for the ‘polysemic’ character of borders underscored by Balibar, Europe’s management of its internal and external frontiers provides a clear illustration. While the EU has eased the crossing of internal borders for holders of European passports—not only to facilitate intra-Union travel but also to enable visa-free residence and employment—its external borders have been 'hardening' for non-EU migrants, especially those from Africa and the Middle East. Such hardening is further intensified by the evolution of borders into 'mobile interlinking structures' (Gschrey, 2011, p. 185) that no longer strictly adhere to state territorial perimeters and can even be ‘exported’ elsewhere. This is evident in the involvement of supposedly safe 'third countries' (neighbors to Europe) which function as buffer zones to keep migrants from even reaching European physical borderlines, a practice known as 'externalization' (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, pp. 171-172), particularly common in the management of the EU’s southern borders (Del Sarto, 2021; Rodríguez Ortiz, 2020).

Border as biopolitical dispositif: unpacking the nexus between state borders and bodily boundaries

While global capital is increasingly capable of traversing transnational spaces, national and supranational borders persist largely as biopolitical *dispositifs* governing human mobility while, simultaneously, producing or reinforcing identities. Due to the highly ‘selective’ capacity of techno-borders, contemporary mobility regimes mold the body itself into the primary site where the border operation takes place, serving as both a target and effect of these technologies, as I shall illustrate in this section.

Before delving into this line of discussion, it is crucial to clarify that while surveillance technologies may target everyone, regardless of their status within a country, their impact varies significantly from person to person. As Palitto and Heyman observe, 'amplified border security regimes' produce 'differential mobility effects,' leading to various forms of inequality in people's ability to cross borders (2019, p. 318). The rise of automated surveillance systems has further intensified this capacity for selective sorting. Beyond regulating migration flows, border regimes also serve to reinforce social boundaries within national territories through selective surveillance practices. Within state borders, this surveillance is often 'racialized,' as evidenced by the disproportionate monitoring and policing of Black and Brown people in Western Countries. Simone Browne's study on the targeting of Black people as potential agents of crime or disorder in the USA, has exposed not only the discriminatory and sometimes violent outcomes of surveillance, but also its role in actively constructing 'racialized' bodies. Her study illustrates how 'enactments of surveillance reify boundaries along racial lines, thereby reifying race' (2015, p. 8).

Browne's insights, suggesting a subtle relationship between the borders of the state and the boundaries of the body, prompt a critical question: in what ways are 'techno-borders' reshaping people's bodies and identities?

Norris and Armstrong contend that the surveillance gaze itself represents an 'unsolicited intrusion … a violation of the boundaries of self' (1999, p. 4). Patel further expands on this, arguing that whether surveillance is formal or informal, mechanical or direct, distant or close-up, those in control of it can draw upon broader power structures to simultaneously control bodies and obscure the observer's position (Patel, 2012, p. 271), evoking Foucault's concept of the panopticon. This infiltration of the state's vigilant gaze into the body—differentiated by markers such as race, religion, gender, or sexuality—ultimately inscribes particular identities onto individual bodies, producing subjects labeled as 'good citizens,' 'spies,' 'criminals,' 'terrorists,' 'irregular migrants,' and so forth. Coupled with legal frameworks and cultural policies that reinforce the identities of those deemed to belong, the operation of borders reveals its biopolitical dimension. These dynamics not only challenge our ability to safeguard bodily boundaries against invasive scrutiny, but also raise broader questions concerning bodily autonomy, understood as the power to define ourselves in our own terms.

In what follows, I examine the role and potential of art in reclaiming the body within digital control societies by analyzing two examples of artistic works that address the impacts of surveillance and border regimes on bodies. The selected artworks serve as case studies within two specific contexts: post-9/11 USA, with its anti-terrorist security measures, and the European Union's border operations targeting irregular migration. Rather than 'humanizing' migrants to elicit empathy through narratives of victimhood, these artistic interventions focus on revealing the often hidden or overlooked practices, locations, and mechanisms of surveillance that target the body and its intimate spaces. Through this analysis, I raise the following questions: how can these artistic practices challenge discriminatory border regimes and reclaim the body as a space for self-determination? Furthermore, can art engage audiences and empower those most vulnerable to state surveillance systems, or is the artist ultimately a privileged observer and actor within society?

Resisting racialized surveillance under the USA's 'War on Terror'

My first 'site' of discussion centers on the USA's domestic 'War on Terror' in the post-9/11 era. Scholars have observed the normalization of a pervasive surveillance system during this period,

integral to the rhetoric and policies of the 'War on Terror,' which legitimizes extensive monitoring, control, and visualization of racialized bodies (Patel, 2012; Cahill, 2019). In particular, under the climate of anti-terror panic, surveillance has increasingly focused on what Patel terms 'brown bodies'—individuals associated with Islam, especially those of Middle Eastern and South Asian origin. Patel describes the concept of 'brown' as a 'process ... that articulates perceived security threats within the national imagination, stemming from racialized constructions of the dangerous “other,” merging issues of immigration and terrorism' (2012, p. 218).

In this context, Hasan Elahi, a Bangladeshi-born American artist and scholar [1], was listed as a suspected terrorist and became the subject of an FBI investigation after 9/11. Though later cleared, Elahi began to voluntarily report his activities to the FBI to avoid further suspicion. This practice eventually evolved into the artistic project *Tracking Transience*, based on Elahi’s sharing of his daily activities in a website where he documents and exhibits the details of his life through photographs. Visitors to this project’s website can view an automated slideshow of images that alternates between individual photos and collages. Some images show dates superimposed on a ‘real-life’ scenery, while others display both dates and geographic coordinates on a black background.

Although Elahi’s initial intent was to create a permanent alibi for himself, his self-surveillance practice goes beyond merely protecting him from the threat of deportation to ‘Guantanamo’ (Thompson, 2007). As an art project, *Tracking Transience* challenges the surveillance system in at least two ways. First, Elahi takes control from within the system by mimicking the actions of surveillance agents and actively deploying similar technologies such as cameras and geolocalization. By replacing external surveillance with self-monitoring, the artist retains the power to decide what to reveal and what to conceal. For instance, his photographs only show material objects or empty places, thereby revealing the surveillance mechanism without exposing its habitual ‘human targets.’

Secondly, the artwork inundates its audience with an overwhelming amount of personal data, far exceeding what would be necessary for a police investigation. While sharing typical records like financial transactions, transportation details, and real-time locations, Elahi also documents the most mundane aspects of his life—his meals, the beds he sleeps in, the toilets he uses. This approach creates an ironic, almost mocking effect, transforming Elahi’s self-surveillance into a 'potlatch'-like artistic gesture [2]. The excessiveness of his documentation is economically 'unproductive' in that the virtual costs of gathering information far exceed what’s required and fail to fulfill the core objective of surveillance from a policing perspective—to 'catch a suspect.' Symbolically, however, his project serves as a form of 'counter-production,' drawing attention to the inherent excesses in a surveillance system that polices bodies and intrudes upon private spaces.

Elahi’s project, which began in the early 2000s, anticipated the current trend of publicly sharing private details on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Today, people voluntarily construct digital profiles, blending external surveillance with self-surveillance, often without fully realizing their exposure to corporate and state monitoring. Unlike Elahi’s controlled self-disclosure, which avoids displaying bodies and faces, social media users frequently share personal images, making themselves more vulnerable to external control. While Elahi’s approach serves as a conscious critique of surveillance, shaped by his experiences with racial profiling, contemporary self-surveillance practices often represent an unknowing submission to what Shoshana Zuboff terms 'surveillance capitalism,' wherein people enter a 'Faustian bargain' with digital platforms, sacrificing privacy for participation (Zuboff, 2019, p. viii).

In an interview, Zuboff underscores another crucial point about the society of ‘surveillance’: even when individuals do not feel personally affected by surveillance in harmful or intrusive ways, their actions may have unintended consequences for others (VPRO Documentary, 2019). For example, by sharing images of their faces, ordinary citizens provide valuable data to train algorithms that enhance facial recognition technologies. These advancements, in turn, can be used by state agencies to the detriment of individuals targeted by surveillance as security threats.

The vast proliferation of voluntarily shared bodily images on contemporary digital platforms, including personal photos of faces and bodies often paired with details such as age, gender, and place of birth in user profiles, has facilitated the creation of extensive databases. These databases serve as raw material for developing biometric technologies for facial and bodily recognition. One of the advancements in AI technology involves the development of an algorithm capable of identifying an individual’s sexual orientation based on facial features. A research that utilized 35,000 publicly available images from dating site profiles, achieved a 91% accuracy rate in guessing male’s sexual orientation (Levin, 2017). These findings, indicating the ability of AI technologies to disclose people’s sexual orientation potentially without their consent highlight serious concerns involved in the use of personal data available on public platforms. The intricate questions that arise from the suggested connections between sexual orientation and biological factors are beyond the scope of my discussion in this article. The point I would like to stress is that, beyond the evident risk of such invasive technology enabling targeted discrimination at worst, or targeted marketing at best, this example underscores a broader issue: the transformation of the body in digital spaces into a repository of informational data—a typical currency in free-to-use platforms. Crucially, the body appears not only vulnerable to being ‘penetrated’ by the surveillance gaze (which presupposes a fixed ‘interiority’ or ‘identity’ to be uncovered beneath the ‘skin’), but also susceptible to being ‘decoded’ and ‘re-coded’ in ways beyond our control, thereby exposing it to the very power to inscribe an identity upon it.

Face-recognition technologies and artistic interventions along biometric lines

The focus on the face reveals the ability of modern techno-borders to 'zoom in on our bodies' (Gschrey, 2011, p. 185), transforming the body itself, with its contours and characteristics, into a 'frontier' of control. Biometric tools are now used not only in traditional border patrol spaces like airports and harbors but also in urban CCTV systems. As biometric 'passcodes' gradually replace traditional ID cards, bodily features become identifiers, rendering the body itself a materialized 'site' of the border. As Mezzadra and Neilson observe, new biometric and information technologies have '[inscribed] borders onto migrants' bodies,' contributing to the 'ongoing deterritorialization of borders' (2013, p. 173).

Raul Gschrey’s art project directly addresses the biometric capabilities of contemporary border surveillance. An art professor at the University of Frankfurt, Gschrey focuses his research and creative work on surveillance and migration practices at European borders. His series *Typical Inhabitants*, initiated in 2008 as part of the larger project on visual surveillance *Contemporary Closed Circuits*, was originally conceived as a series of composite photographs. These images are created by blending the biometric characteristics of individuals—half male, half female—who frequently move through German cities such as Frankfurt, Munich, and Berlin. By combining facial data captured by city surveillance cameras, Gschrey produces composite faces that are then used to

create composite masks. These masks can be worn in public spaces, allowing users to evade biometric recognition (Gschrey 2012: 196).

By distributing the artwork to ordinary people and encouraging them to wear the masks on city streets to evade CCTV recognition, the artist seeks to intervene in public spaces with a direct form of social activism. Besides, his artwork does not counter the logic of surveillance merely on a practical level, but also on a conceptual one. While facial recognition technology relies on distinctive characteristics to match individuals with their biometric profiles, often leading to differential treatment at border crossings, the composite technique instead emphasizes similarities. By superimposing features, it creates faces with intermedial characteristics, challenging bodily categories and identity-based borders across lines of sex, gender, race, age, and more.

Following the initial series, ‘The Typical Frankfurter’, and those based on other German cities, Gschrey subsequently created masks for other European cities, making his project one that extends 'across' and is designed 'to cross' European borders. These composite masks aim to raise awareness of the growing reach and prevalence of biometric identification systems. The biometrization and automation of borders could have profound implications for the lives of irregular migrants in Europe, particularly for those who enter legally but remain in the EU after their visas expire. To address this gap, Europe has implemented the 'Visa Information System' (Gschrey, 2012, pp. 196-197). As a consequence of this system, crossing the perimeters of national borders is no longer the sole concern, as border control can now be enacted ubiquitously. By highlighting the technologies underlying modern border apparatuses, Gschrey’s project sheds light on the displacement of state boundaries, where the body itself becomes the materialized 'frontier' of surveillance.

Conclusion

The case studies hereby examined represent forms of artistic intervention critically engaged with surveillance technologies that reflect on the impacts of border politics on the body. These art projects demonstrate art’s potential to expose the often invisible mechanisms of control and exclusion embedded within modern biopolitical border regimes. Although both Elahi and Gschrey utilize surveillance tools and turn them against the system, their strategies of resistance differ significantly. Elahi adopts a potlatch-like gesture by voluntarily providing overabundant information to surveillance agents, creating an ironic effect that exposes the system by a measure of excess. In contrast, Gschrey designs biometric masks to limit the intrusive surveillance gaze on individual bodies and to elude its automated selective capacity for individuation of specific targets. On a symbolic level, by blurring and blending the biometric traits of different bodies distinguished by markers such as gender, age, and race, Gschrey’s work challenges the boundaries of self-identity that rely on the visual differentiation of physical features, inviting the observer to see themselves in the Other.

Finally, let us return to the question of whether the artist remains a privileged observer and actor in society or someone capable of empowering the audiences. By sharing their artworks with a broader public—not limited to traditional art consumers—both Elahi and Gschrey promote an interactive form of social participation. Their work encourages individuals not to remain passive witnesses to surveillance and border control but to actively explore ways to resist these forces. The spaces chosen for their artistic practices are strategically designed to foster audience engagement: whether through the internet or direct interaction in public spaces, these artists move art beyond the

exclusivist confines of traditional exhibition venues. This approach reflects a commitment to bridging the gap between art and social life. In this sense, the artist becomes a mediator, cultivating a more critical and engaged public. As both Elahi and Gschrey are also scholars, through their artistic interventions, they bring their insights into more participative venues beyond the walls of academia as well.

However, even an informed public is not necessarily an empowered one. There remain practical challenges to be confronted, shaping our capacity in navigating digitized spaces to protect the body/private space from intrusive surveillance and policing. One of the reasons, as mentioned before, is that we are compelled to accept the (unjust) bargain to exchange bodily autonomy and privacy for other benefits, such as the convenience of a fast, automated border control at an airport or the access to the opportunities of social participation and visibility offered by digital platforms. One might want to question whether such a decision is truly 'free' to make or if it involves an inherent 'imbalance of power,' not to mention the even more limited 'power of choice' of those struggling with poverty and marginalization. Therefore, whether increased public awareness spurred by such artworks can lead to more just, equitable, and transparent systems of border governance remains an intricate question. Addressing this issue requires collective action and social pressure on institutions, rather than relying solely on individual choices in daily life informed by personal 'awareness'.

Notes

1. Hasan Elahi is currently a professor of art and Dean of the College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan.

2. In the essay 'The notion of expenditure' (1933), Bataille refers to the concept of 'potlatch' to illustrate the idea of 'unproductive expenditure'—an act of excess that defies economic rationality, focusing instead on the symbolic power of loss. The term 'potlatch' refers to a practice among Northwestern American Indigenous communities, whose members engage in luxurious gift-giving and exuberant resource expenditure to assert social status and power. Bataille argues that such acts challenge the logic of productivity by valuing excess and sacrifice over accumulation, thereby underscoring an alternative dimension of human economy that transcends a purely utilitarian understanding.

References

Balibar, É. (2002). What is a border? In *Politics and the other scene* (pp. 75-86). Verso.

Bataille, G. (1985). The notion of expenditure. In A. Stoekl (Ed.), *Visions of excess: Selected writings, 1927-1939* (pp. 116-129). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1933)

Browne, S. (2015). *Dark matters: On the surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw89p

Cahill, S. (2019). Visual art, corporeal economies, and the 'new normal' of surveillant policing in the war on terror. *Surveillance & Society, 17*(3/4), 352-366. https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/index

Chang, S.-s. Y. (2007). Representing Taiwan: Shifting geopolitical frameworks. In D. D.-w. Wang & C. Rojas (Eds.), *Writing Taiwan: A new literary history* (pp. 17-25). Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv120qt7z.6

Del Sarto, R. A. (2021). Exporting the European order beyond the border. In *Borderlands: Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198833550.003.0004

Elahi, H. (2014, July 1). I share everything. Or do I? *TED Ideas*. https://ideas.ted.com/i-share-everything-or-do-i/

Elahi, H. *Tracking Transience v2.2.* Wayne State University. https://elahi.wayne.edu/track/

Graham, S. (2016). *Vertical: The city from satellites to bunkers*. Verso.

Gschrey, R. (2010). Contemporary closed circuits – Subversive dialogues: Artistic strategies against surveillance. *Surveillance & Society, 7*(2), 144-164. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v7i2.4140

Gschrey, R. (2011). Borderlines: Surveillance, identification and artistic explorations along European borders. *Surveillance & Society, 9*(1/2), 185-202. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v9i1/2.4146

Levin, S. (2017, September 8). New AI can guess whether you're gay or straight from a photograph. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/07/new-artificial-intelligence-can-tell-whether-youre-gay-or-straight-from-a-photograph

Mezzadra, S., & Neilson, B. (2013). *Border as method, or, the multiplication of labor*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131cvw

Pallitro, R., & Heyman, J. (2008). Theorizing cross-border mobility: Surveillance, security and identity. *Surveillance & Society, 5*(3). https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v5i3.3426

Patel, T. G. (2012). Surveillance, suspicion and stigma: Brown bodies in a terror-panic climate. *Surveillance & Society, 10*(3/4), 215-234. http://www.surveillance-and-society.org

Rodríguez Ortiz, R. (2012). Beyond borders: Autoimmune practices in a state of law. In J. Hutnyk (Ed.), *Beyond borders* (pp. 220-231). Pavement Books.

Thompson, C. (2007, May 22). The see-through CEO. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/2007/05/ps-transparency/

VPRO Documentary. (2019, December 21). *Shoshana Zuboff on surveillance capitalism* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIXhnWUmMvw

Virilio, P. (1997). The overexposed city. In N. Leach (Ed.), *Rethinking architecture: A reader in cultural theory* (pp. 381-390). Routledge. (Original work published 1984)

Whitley, L. (2012). Border subjects. In J. Hutnyk (Ed.), *Beyond borders* (pp. 11-24). Pavement Books.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism*. Profile Books.