The (Dis)appearance of Ai Weiwei: negotiations and (In)visibilities

Louise Nørgaard Glud
Aarhus University, Denmark
imvlng@hum.au.dk

Sofie Stenbøg
Aarhus University, Denmark
sofiestenboeg@hotmail.com

Anders Albrechtslund
Aarhus University, Denmark
alb@hum.au.dk

Abstract

This paper offers a study of surveillance themes relating to Ai Weiwei's highly discussed disappearance and later reappearance in 2011. Our study is based on an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) approach and we focus on the manifold negotiations and (in)visibilities relating to the dramatic events as well as Ai's artwork and life.

1. Introduction

On April 3, 2011, the Chinese artist and civil rights activist Ai Weiwei disappeared. The police put him under arrest just before boarding a flight to Hong Kong while his studio was searched and family and staff questioned. This arrest provoked widespread resistance. International artists, human rights groups and even governments demanded his release. Thus, the disappearance (and later reappearance on June 22 2011) of Ai resulted in the massive appearance of his artwork and political views to the global attention and also leaded to Ai's imposing nomination as the world's most powerful person in the art world in 2011 by the influential British magazine 'ArtReview' (Art Review 2011).

This paper examines Ai's (dis)appearence by analyzing how he uses surveillance technologies as a tool and a theme in his artwork by closely monitoring and displaying aspects of his own life. For instance, in artworks and on his blog Ai made visible how the Chinese government monitors him and used this to question who monitors and who is being monitored, and by this act challenged the idea of the existence of a fixed and asymmetrical power relation between the State and the individual. By analyzing Ai's art we explore how power relations are negotiated and how processes of making (in)visible bring attention to civil rights issues. Our aim is to unfold what is at play in Ai's (dis)appearance and artwork and how surveillance technologies can be potentially empowering in the political dimension of his artistic project.

The article argues that Ai's work through the attempt of the Chinese government to hide the surveillance situation is turned into acts of protection. By using the surveillance camera in his work, Ai is not only making the surveillance by the government visible, he is also re-assembling it. In that way Ai's shaping of the surveillance situation becomes an alternative to the ideology promoted by the Chinese government and he then becomes a spokesperson for many (silent) Chinese. Consequently his self-surveillance practices become an act of protection, not only of Ai personally, but also of the freedom of expression.

The overall analytical framework for the paper is inspired by a material semiotics approach and semiotics. Here we will use Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005; Latour & Hermant 1998) and Peirces sign triad (Peirce 1994) to study Ai's employment of surveillance technologies by tracing the translations among human and non-human actors and acts of making (in)visible in his artwork and life.

The article consists of two main sections: The first of these (section two) traces the many agencies at play in the surveillance of Ai. The second (section three) discusses self-surveillance and empowerment as themes in Ai's use of surveillance technologies.

2. Surveillance technologies in Ai Weiwei's artistic practice

Ai Weiwei can be considered a pioneer in self-surveillance as he since the early 1980s has experimented with many types of technologies and activities to monitor and document his own actions and ideas, and with the growing distribution of social media and new ubiquitous surveillance technologies the extent and diversity of these activities has just increased.

In 2006 he started a blog, which attained an extensive number of photos, videos and substantiating facts in 2009, when it was shut down by the Chinese government (Ai & Ambrozy 2011). Through this and several art projects, he has documented the Chinese government's surveillance and assaults on him as well as on the Chinese people. For example he took pictures when the Chinese police beat him up while he was attending a court meeting in Chengdou and posted them on his blog, and he later exhibited an x-ray of the brain haemorrhage he sustained during this event (Bredal 2010). By making these assaults visible for the public eye he is protesting against the violence used by the Chinese government to silence his political criticism and doing that, he is not only protecting his own right to speak but also the human right to speak.

For several years Ai Weiwei has been kept under intensive surveillance by the Chinese authorities. For instance undercover police have mounted 15 surveillance cameras on the street where he lives which, according to Ai, makes it the most watched street in Beijing (Branigan 2012). Moreover, he was constantly monitored during his 81 days of imprisonment. As a response to these surveillance activities Ai made 15 marble sculptures of surveillance cameras (Viewer 2012) and put up four surveillance cameras in his home and streamed the footage to Weiweicam.com (Widdall 2011). In the following we trace the human and non-human actors in the surveillance situation performed by the government and in these two projects to investigate the surveillance situation as a continuous process of defining and redefining.

2.1. Governmental surveillance

The government cameras are, according to Ai, placed by undercover police (BBC 2011) and are thus actors in a network that seeks to hide certain actions. The act of mounting is kept invisible to avoid calling attention to the camera as a government tool to monitor Ai. But this invisibility implies ambiguity. At first sight it seems like the government tries to keep its actions invisible to Ai so that they wouldn't affect his acts towards the camera. But having a closer look on the situation the secrecy appears to more subtle, since the government also have interests in bringing the cameras to Ai's attention, to have censoring effects on his actions. As a result the government needs to make visible to Ai that they are trying to keep these activities invisible. Each camera consists of several smaller parts such as a lens, a recorder, a cable and a power source (BBC 2011). The lens makes it possible to watch what happens in front of it, the recorder stores it, the cable transmits the picture to a screen and the power source makes it possible for this small network to be turned on. Since the camera is connected to a screen via a cable it is also bound to the location to be able to monitor. A breakdown in one of these actors would result in a breakdown in the camera as a whole. As we can see from tracing the actors in this small network, the surveillance situation performed by the government is fragile because it has to be constantly performed as (in)visible while self-sustaining in its connections. To keep this surveillance situation stable the government takes action to protect the camera against attacks. For example the cameras are put out of reach in high places such as lamp poles and Ai was questioned and accused by the police of throwing rocks at a surveillance camera (which according to Ai never happened) (NDTV 2012). As we can see the government tries to cut off the surveillance camera from the touch of the monitored. However, visually the camera can also be used in counter-acts against the governments set-up: For instance, the watched can make protests in front of the cameras lens or the cameras looks can be used for other means. To

break the bond through vision the government would have to turn 'off' the camera. However, this would go against their attempts to keep it 'on'. Moreover, the watched sees the camera both when it is 'on' and 'off', and this visibility is a requisite for the surveillance situation to affect behavior and work repressively. In the next section we will analyze how the connection to the camera through vision is used by Ai to shape and operate the camera and from that translate the surveillance situation into protest acts against the asymmetrical power relation performed by the Chinese Government.

2.2. "My Surveillance Camera"

In 2010 Ai made 15 white marble cameras and called each of them "My Surveillance Camera". They are bigger than the cameras in front of his residence and they are placed on the floor, within reach of the one watching them.

To focus on how Ai's marble cameras act as sign in the surveillance network we will use Peirce's sign triad (Peirce 1994). The triad makes it possible to focus on the relation between the government's surveillance camera (the object), the marble camera (which can work as an icon, an index and a symbol) and the impact it creates for the one meeting it. A sign can be iconic which means that it represents its object through resemblance (Peirce 1994, p.121). The marble camera resembles the government's surveillance cameras since it has the same shape. However, it does not resemble it when it comes to its inner network and its functionality. For example it doesn't allow you to see through its lens and it doesn't record what is in front of it, even though Ai describes how the sight of the government cameras alone intimidates him (BBC 2011). In this way he emphasizes that the camera can also act when it is not monitoring. Here, the shape of the surveillance camera alone makes it part of the surveillance situation.

For a sign to work as an index there must be a causal proximity between the object and the sign (Peirce 1994, pp.9–10). The marble camera is causally connected to the hand (Ai's) that shaped it and to the marble rock. The connection to the hand is further enhanced in the title "My Surveillance Camera". In that way Ai takes ownership over the surveillance camera through the act of shaping. Doing that he also creates an intimate alliance with the camera where he him- self and the camera is translated into a new actor: a my-camera or an Ai-camera, which acts as a small personal monument of the surveillance relation. In that way the Ai-camera becomes an act of remembrance of the daily encounter between Ai and the surveillance cameras. Here the surveillance situation is lifted out of the everyday life and into the hall of fame. In that process it is translated from a condition in the built environment into an object of importance. Creating this

alliance Ai protests against a surveillance situation where he is casted to be watched by the camera not acting with it let alone owning it or being part of it. As mentioned earlier there is also a connection between the marble camera and the marble rock. The marble rock acts by being stable and in that way put focus on the material. Marble has been used for statues in ancient China and as such refers to an antiquated time and mentality and the acts carried out to maintain status quo. Here the camera becomes a tool to hold on to Confucianism and thus a more hierarchical relationship between individual and state.

For the surveillance camera to become a symbol of something it needs to be iteratively performed in a certain way (Jørgensen 1993). As we can see Ai and the government perform the camera in different ways and make visible the struggle between two different ways of acting out the surveillance situation. The government performs the camera as something, which only works when it is 'on'. To keep it 'on' it must be kept out of reach for actors the government cannot control. In "My Surveillance Camera" Ai performs the camera as acting when it's 'on' as well as 'off'. In that way he performs the surveillance situation as a network where the camera is working in different ways. By doing that he also makes room for the camera to be negotiated by a variety of actors such as the marble and the human touch and vision. In that way he displays that the surveillance situation is fragile and ever changing. At the same time the camera as a picture or sign intimidates him. This makes visible that even though Ai uses the camera in new ways he still performs it as a power tool. "My Surveillance Camera" thus shows that the camera is fragile as a network but stable as a symbol of power.

2.3. Weiweicam

As another response to the immense surveillance and especially the surveillance experienced within the 81 days of detention in 2011, Ai mounted four surveillance cameras inside his house. He placed two in his working room (a high angle shot making it possible to see his desk from above and an eye-level shot where Ai's head is on the level with the focus), one in his bedroom and one in his yard (Ai 2012). By acting with the camera (mounting it, adjusting the angle, turning the camera on and streaming it on the Internet) Ai goes against the government's attempt to be in control by keeping the surveillance camera disconnected from the touch of the watched. Instead he performs the surveillance camera as something, which can also be used to empower the watched. Moreover, by making this event visible he demonstrates that he is acting against the government. Here his way of handling the camera becomes an act of protest. However Ai presents his self-surveillance as a way of helping the government:

"I explained to them: you have 15 cameras on me, and the camera I set up in my bedroom is exactly the same camera that I had above my head during my 81 detention days. So I am doing you a favor to (let you) really know what I am doing and have a close watch." (Wade 2012).

Ai moves the surveillance camera into his house and even into the most intimate area: his bedroom for the government to have "a close watch". Doing this it seems like he embraces the government's surveillance camera. However, he is really suffocating and defusing it. Looking through some of the video recording from Weiweicam we can investigate this further. 08 minutes, 34 seconds and 30 milliseconds in the video surveillance Ai Weiwei sits at his working table. We see him from a high level and an eye level angle. On the table there is a laptop, a computer screen, a keyboard, several books and papers. Ai taps on the keyboard on his laptop then on his keyboard connected to the bigger computer. In the streaming from the two cameras we see a bed with wrinkled linen and in the court we see a door into the studio, a table with six chairs, and a bench (Ai 2012). From this small description of the different actors we can see two things: Mapping the actors takes huge amounts of time, let alone analyzing their connections and agencies. Moreover, the angle at Ai's table makes it difficult to see what he does on his computer screens. In this way Ai buries the viewer in the type of data he wants to make visible. He directs the camera towards the mundane acts such as sleeping and sitting at his desk but not to what he is reading and writing on his computers. This shows that Ai is not simply making everything visible, he is selecting what to make visible as any image-maker does. What this demonstrates is that moving the camera to provide a close watch is not the same as giving a good or interesting watch (Lauritsen 2010, p.46). Besides directing the camera towards mundane activities and away from political acts on the screen Ai account for another agency in his self-surveillance:

"It is the exact day, one year ago, that I went missing for 81 days. All my family and friends and everyone who cared were wondering where this guy was. So on the anniversary I think people may have worries. It's a gift to them: I'm here and you can see me," (Branigan 2012).

In this account the camera is used to make Ai visible for the ones who cares about him. This can also explain why he mounted a camera in eye level at his desk. The facial expression is where the ones who know him can see his mood. Placing the camera in this angle he not only makes visible that he is physically present, but also that he is ok. Here the alliance between the camera and Ai's facial expression creates a new actor: A face-camera that primarily works by expressing or communicating Ai's mood. This means that Ai is not only using the surveillance

camera to monitor himself he is also using it to express him-self. In this way Ai turns the camera 'on' to his activities as well as to his emotions.

By analyzing the recordings from Weiweicam.com we can see that Ai's protest acts is not tangible in the same way as breaking a government camera or committing tax crime. To use the data from Weweicam as well as the government's cameras as proof for going against the government's performance of the surveillance situation demands iteratively tracing the different actors at play as making suitable countermoves. For example the government uses the data to trace and attack the different human and non-human actors enrolled in Ai's projects. They arrest his employees and wife, tries to shut down his studio, shut down his blog and stop Weiweicam after only 46 hours of monitoring (Wong 2012). Doing that they react to his self-surveillance as a counter act to their own surveillance. As we can see there is an ongoing struggle of who gets to control the camera and create data.

3. Discussion: selfsurveillance and empowerment

In the following, we aim at developing an understanding of the themes at play in Ai's use of surveillance technologies as discussed in section 2. Especially two themes are interesting to explore here: self-surveillance and empowerment.

Surveillance is most often thought of as something undesirable that we should avoid if possible (Gad & Lauritsen 2009). Therefore, self-surveillance at first glance seems to be a strange and unpleasant activity to embark on, especially for an artist and activist that appears to be controversial in the eyes of the government. Yet, for Ai comprehensive self-surveillance is part of his artistic practice and in accordance with his political agenda. This preoccupation with surveillance activities carried out by and directed towards him is interesting artistically, politically and theoretically.

Artistically Ai in "My Surveillance Camera" and "Weiweicam" makes visible a variety of human and non-human actors all participating in the surveillance situation. He does this by shaping, claiming ownership towards and expressively operating the surveillance camera. By doing that Ai not only turns the camera 'on' to monitor activities but also to be touched and felt. In that process he makes visible that the surveillance situation is not a continuum going from working to not working but a network where the camera is working in different ways and where the symbolic meaning of surveillance is not clear-cut, but relational and negotiable but still works as a power symbol. Politically, Ai in his self-surveillance creates an intimate alliance with the

camera where he translates the camera into a protest of the asymmetrical power relationship performed in the government surveillance. Theoretically, Ai's art projects represent a departure from a panoptic surveillance understanding where the monitored participate in the surveillance situation in a particular way (Albrechtslund 2008). As an alternative to this he constructs a set-up where the surveillance have empowering effects and thus can work as a democratic tool for balancing power relations.

As we have seen from the analysis of two of Ai's projects they are considered vandalism by the Chinese government. When Ai uses surveillance cameras in his projects he is performing the surveillance situation in a certain way. In his works he is enhancing some characteristics of the camera such as the shape (My Surveillance Camera) and the agencies involved in operating it (Weiweicam). By doing this he reconstructs the surveillance camera and in that process destructs it as a symbol of governmental control. To understand the acts of construction and destruction we consider Latour's concept of *icono-clash* to be fruitful:

"What we call »icono-clash« [not clasm], is when there is a deep and disturbing uncertainty about the role, power, status, danger, violence of an image or a given representation; when one does not know whether an image should be broken or restored; when one no longer knows if the image-breaker is a courageous innovator or a vandal, if the image-worshipper is a pious bigot or a respectable devout, or if the image-maker is a devious faker or a clever fact-maker and truth-seeker." (Latour 2002).

As we have seen the surveillance camera works as a sign. However there is an ongoing struggle about its meaning as a power symbol, which is expressed in the different ways it is performed by Ai and the government. As we have seen the government uses the camera to define an asymmetrical power relation, where Ai is disconnected from the camera and is casted as a passive "victim" assigned to the government's sovereign vision. Ai's backlash to this is to form intimate alliances with the surveillance camera and use it to empower him-self. But, this does not mean that he welcomes the government's surveillance cameras:

"More generally the critical mind is one that shows the hands of humans at work everywhere so as to slaughter the sanctity of religion, the belief in fetishes, the worship of transcendent, heaven-sent icons, the strengths of ideologies" (Latour 2006, p.7).

When Ai makes visible the network the surveillance camera is connected to, he shows that the meaning of the camera as a symbol is dependent on the relations it forms with other actors. As

a result the camera as a symbol is negotiable and fragile. This shows us that (re)situating the surveillance camera within the network of relations that constitutes the situation helps translating its meaning as a power symbol. The surveillance situation performed by the government is one where the watching is active and powerful and the one being watched is passive and powerless, whereas the surveillance situation performed in Ai's art is one where the watched can also be a watcher and act with the technology as a means of expression. Ai does not break the material the government's cameras are made of. Instead he breaks them as governmental power symbols. In this process he simultaneously reconstruct and destruct the government's surveillance set-up. He reconstructs it by using the shape of the camera in his marble work and by using the same cameras as the government in his self-surveillance. He destructs it by creating an intimate alliance between him and the camera: A small monument of a certain event and a tool for self-expression. In this way Ai makes himself visible in his monitoring project and doing this makes visible any attempt to make him invisible by abducting him or shutting down his communication channel. According to Hanno Rauterberg, an art critic at Die Zeit, the rationale basis guiding Ai's self-surveillance activities can also be summarized like this:

"As long as you can see me, they won't see you- that's his logic. But as soon as you can't see me any more, when you remove me from the screen, then you will be seen, then the eyes of the world will turn on you and everyone will know what happened to me. The images protect him." *(Rauterberg 2009)*

Ai's visibility becomes statements of 'proof of life' and 'freedom of expression' and following from that his invisibility becomes an assault against him as well as of human rights.

Conclusion

On June 22, 2011, Ai Weiwei was released on bail from the custody of the Chinese authorities. Even though the charges of his involvement in tax evasion were upheld, the release ended Ai's 81 days of disappearance. The reappearance ended much of the speculation about Ai's fate and, to a certain extent, re-established the initial situation that once again diverted the world's attention and, thus, made his artwork and political activism disappear. This is further represented by Ai's unwillingness to comment on the situation (and at the same time hinting that

his silence is dictated by the authorities (Al Jazeera 2011) regardless of his demonstrative Weiweicam.

Our analysis of the disappearance and reappearance of Ai gives us an opportunity to emphasize the ambiguity of certain surveillance relations. While networks are fragile and unstable, symbols of surveillance can be rigid and even anachronistic. This ambiguity leads us to the conclusion that it can be fruitful to study negotiations of power and translations to arrive at an adequate understanding of surveillance situations.

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Author profiles

Louise Nørgaard Glud is a PhD fellow at Dept. of Aesthetics and Communication at Aarhus University (Denmark). Her research interests include Surveillance Studies, Science & Technology Studies; Methods for Developing Mappings of Urban Space; Participatory Design.

Sofie Stenbøg is a Research Assistant at Dept. of Aesthetics and Communication, Aarhus University and holds a BA in Information Studies. Her research interests include Science & Technology Studies and Surveillance Studies.

Anders Albrechtslund is an Associate Professor at Dept. of Aesthetics and Communication, Aarhus University. His main research is within Surveillance Studies; Philosophy of Technology; New Media and Ethics.