

Crisis Vision

Race and
the Cultural
Production
of Surveillance

*Torin
Monahan*



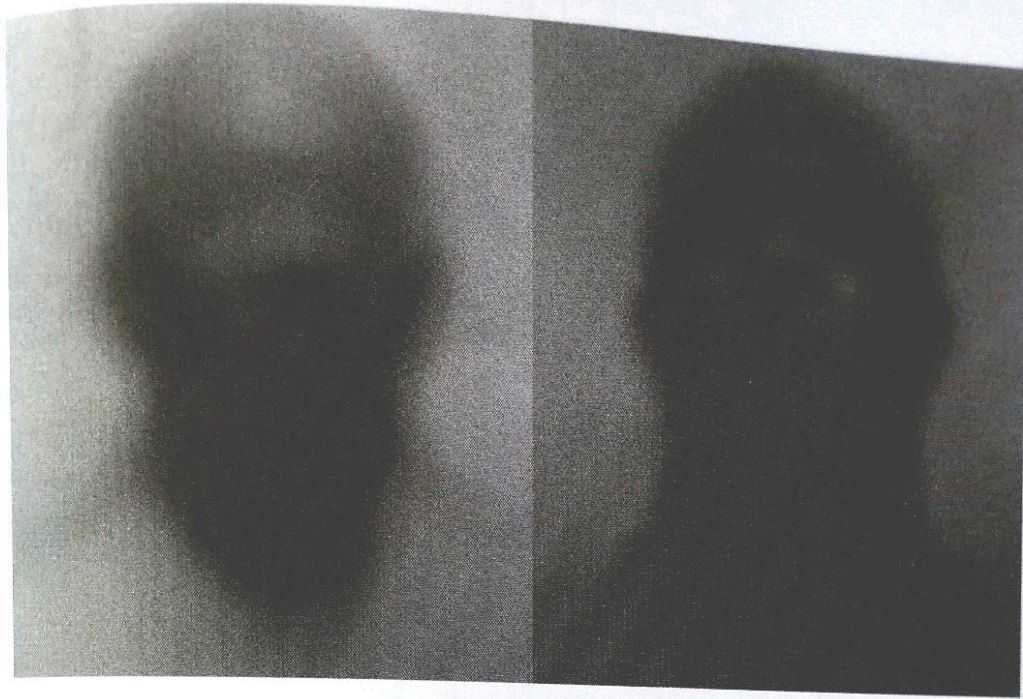


FIGURE 4.7. Paolo Cirio, *Obscurity* (2016). Courtesy of the artist.

the incommensurability between ideals of democratic governance and liberal personhood, on one hand, and crisis-vision cultures of racialized violence and cruelty, on the other. The problem is not solely technical or technocratic but cultural, where deep-seated racism and sexism infuse social practices online and off.

Public viewing of mugshots online feeds into base, voyeuristic impulses of audiences to discreetly view and judge others, at best, or circulate information to publicly shame, mock, or harass individuals, at worst. Instead of being anomalous, trafficking in online mugshots aligns surprisingly well with a broader culture of recent shame-based punishments, including those used by criminal justice systems and parents. For instance, some parents have forced their children to stand in public holding or wearing signs confessing their guilt for things like selling drugs or “twerking at a school dance,” while other parents have hijacked their kids’ social media accounts to say things like “I do not know how to keep [my mouth] shut. I am no longer allowed on Facebook or my phone. *Please ask why.*”⁷²

Seen in this larger context, mugshot websites cannot be easily condemned as the product of disreputable actors seeking to profit from others’ misfortune; they are part of a pervasive cultural logic insisting that shame-based practices are in society’s best interests. Kumarini Silva has called this

skim data from the sites of reporting agencies and make money through linked advertisements to reputation-management services or, in some cases, by charging individuals to have their records expunged.⁶⁵ In these ways, Clare Birchall explains, the mugshot industry capitalizes on a larger economy (and rationality) of data sharing by “aping, cynically and darkly, the work undertaken by datapreneurs to transform open data into profitable forms.”⁶⁶ Thus, the structural violence of economic inequality and institutional racism becomes a resource for sordid actors to exploit, such that they harness unwanted visibility as a form of “poverty capitalism,”⁶⁷ further debasing their targets and performing symbolic violence along the way. Cirio’s *Obscurity* project draws attention to and disrupts these extortion tactics by spoofing the most popular mugshot websites, realistically mirroring their design but modifying the content. He has programmed an algorithm to blur the images and shuffle the data so that arrest information remains (preserving the ostensible public service of sharing arrest data) but individuals cannot be linked to specific arrests (see figure 4.7).⁶⁸ This culture-jamming project then deploys search engine optimization techniques to outrank the spoofed original sites in Google, thereby obfuscating not only the data represented but also the route for accessing them.

Cirio is clearly committed to privacy and the right to be forgotten, where giving people a fresh start is key for maintaining dignity and sociality, as well as for fostering rehabilitation if necessary.⁶⁹ His work performs a compromise position, illustrating how, through an enabling form of opacity, the public’s right to know can harmonize with an individual’s right to be forgotten. However, the equation breaks down in the proposed next steps. Cirio envisions radical democratic decision making on the internet as the antidote to the shaming tactics of mugshot companies; rather than let such companies decide what personal data should be revealed, he turns to the crowd: “My proposal is extreme, pushing boundaries with art, as eventually the democratic process becomes a popular jury open to everyone, where the people can judge to condemn or give mercy to those who have been arrested, by making public their information or removing it.”⁷⁰ This proposal, a *Gladiator*-like scenario where the crowd can “condemn or give mercy,” expresses a somewhat naive faith in the possibility of mature, principled democratic governance in online environments. Ample evidence points to an opposite tendency, toward bullying, trolling, slut shaming, mob rule, and doxing in online spaces.⁷¹ *Obscurity* reveals, perhaps inadvertently,

placing people in cruel contraptions on public display, branding, confessional letters, and other outward marks of guilt, such as the scarlet letter "A" signaling adultery in Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel.⁵⁸ The industrial period saw a reduction in these shame-based forms of punishment, at least for whites, perhaps because of the relative anonymity and mobility of individuals during this time. Forms of incarceration came to the fore instead as preferred modes of punishment, depriving people of liberty rather than reputation.⁵⁹ However, the past few decades have witnessed a return of shame-based punishments, as with the DUI sentences mentioned above, but also including sentences requiring individuals to wear in public large sandwich-board signs proclaiming their crime, such as "I stole mail. This is my punishment."⁶⁰ This has led some legal scholars to decry resurrected "public humiliation penalties" as dangerous anachronisms with unknown psychological effects.⁶¹ Especially with the spread of social media and internet-based repositories, shaming tactics gain renewed traction—if not efficacy at deterrence—as people can be embarrassed in their networks, subject to mob attacks and doxing, and face long-term consequences for any accusation, real or fabricated.⁶²

In his project *Obscurity*, artist Paolo Cirio engages this terrain of public shaming by addressing the violence inherent in the online publication and dissemination of police mugshots. In the United States, mugshot photographs are taken as part of the intake process for all arrestees, with those photographs legally considered as part of the public record, so most of those photographs can easily be found online on the websites of police departments, local media, or private companies. The circulation of these images, along with the person's name, age, charge, and arrest date, creates a persistent stigmatizing trace. Regardless of whether the charges are dropped or a person is convicted, the record remains, potentially damaging an individual's reputation and psychological well-being as well as their prospects for employment. Given that police display well-documented discriminatory practices, disproportionately arresting poor and racialized individuals,⁶³ it should not be surprising that the damaging effects of these records would accrue to the most marginalized members of society, adding another layer of what Oscar Gandy Jr. has termed "cumulative disadvantage."⁶⁴

Cirio intervenes in this process by targeting third-party websites that compile mugshots and arrest data and make it easy to search for a person by name. These sites, such as MugShots.com and MugshotsOnline.com,



FIGURE 2.3. Paolo Cirio, *Street Ghosts* (2014). Courtesy of the artist.

delivers photographic representations of streetscapes) to draw attention to and problematize Google's visual archive of individuals in public space.⁵⁸ For this project, Cirio locates images of people in Google Street View and creates life-size representations of those blurred figures in the exact location in the urban landscape where the original photos were made. One work superimposes onto a rusted and graffitied wall an incongruous figure of a balding man in a long-sleeve pink shirt and light blue jeans (see figure 2.3). Overgrown weeds rise up around the man's lower legs, obscuring his feet, as he tilts slightly to the side with what appears to be a spade in one hand and a plant in the other. He seems to be gardening in the exact spot where the weeds now overtake his past efforts.⁵⁹

This piece performs on several levels. It is a glimpse into the Google archive and a signification, through a singular figure, of the vast totality of personal images contained within it. By reproducing images of people in space, Cirio removes Google images from their corporate frame and imposes an artistic one that harkens back to, but does not recapture, the original. In the process, he calls attention to the violence of stripping data from context and challenges the unsanctioned production of personal images—images that become Google's property upon their creation. On another level, *Street Ghosts* fabricates a counter-archive that is etched into the built world. It comprises two-dimensional surface illustrations of what came before, communicating the incompleteness of all representation, including those of our many "data doubles" in institutions' digital archives.⁶⁰ Unlike many of those data doubles, Cirio's figures stage their own temporality and degradation, visibly eroding over time as analog instruments of memory and mortality.⁶¹ They divulge their latent opacity and readily abandon their fleeting gesture toward the real, becoming palimpsests or backdrops for other urban articulations, other embodiments of meaning in space. Thus, contrary to Google's archive, even though this counter-archive points back to the moment of image creation, it is decidedly nonindexical. It offers intentionally ephemeral and ghostlike representations of representations, undermining the implied realism of the Google archive by demonstrating the necessary but arbitrary function of framing in establishing meaning or truth.

Other artists have used the urban landscape in a similar fashion to raise pointed questions about borders, walls, and other architectural manifestations of forced separation. For instance, Kai Wiedenhöfer's powerful