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The Representations of Surveillance in Conceptual Writing: To See and To Be Seen

Yuko Hori

Introduction

In the postmodern period, the ideological definitions of gender, sexuality, race, and social situations have undergone considerable alterations. The conventional boundaries by which people used to define themselves have become less clear as a result of the rise of postmodernism and the spread of globalization.¹⁾ Alongside this, the concept of individualism itself has significantly shifted away from a traditional definition. Fredric Jameson offers the following view on changing attitudes towards the concept of individualism in postmodern society:

... today, from any number of distinct perspectives, the social theorists, the psychoanalysts, even the linguists, not to speak of those of us who work in the area of culture and cultural and formal change, are all exploring the notion that that kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual or individualist subject is “dead”: and that one might even describe the concept of the

unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological. (6)

After social paradigms and discourses based on preconceived notions of individualism were re-evaluated in the 1960s, critical theory and literary writing began to explore the sense of self-identity in Western society. In particular, one of the intellectual movements that brought about significant change is the emergence of the Internet. In the time when 4.7 billion people use social media around the world,²⁾ accounting for nearly 60 percent of the total global population (“Global Social Media Statistics”), social media has been used in various ways. The public sentiment about the relationship between social media and the representation of subjectivity has changed dramatically since it entered the mass culture. In the research done over the past two decade, scholars and critics define the term “social media” in many ways, but fundamentally they agree that social media allows individual people to connect as individuals, groups and organizations. Especially in the 2000s, various social networking sites have appeared and disappeared globally. It is notable that iconic and crucial services in contemporary lives such as LinkedIn, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram all emerged in this decade. This means that contemporary people are eager to connect to others, see what others do and show off themselves.

While the digital world changed dramatically because of the development of the Internet, the real world also entered the new phase, especially in the United States. On September 11th in 2001, people across the world experienced a considerable shock to see symbols of the US economy and military collapse and know that the terrorist actions caused the death of at least 2,800 innocent people (“CNN Editorial Research”). They were also surprised to find that despite advanced DNA analysis, more than

half of the victims could not be identified even by means of DNA (Atkins 101–2). After that event, several critics and scholars have reconsidered their social systems and the various corresponding subjects including the issue of selfhood. Several critics and scholars, including Slavoy Žižek and Graydon Carter, have stated that postmodernism or postmodern irony ended on 11th of September in 2001 (O'Rourke). People have had to create new sense of value, new social and political system.

In such an era, the descriptions of selfhood have also changed in a “new” way. In line with social changes, representations of people in literary works have also changed. One of the most conspicuous of these alterations of viewpoint can be seen in poetry. In the postmodern period of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, many modern poets have dealt with issues of the construction of a sense of self in relation to the social sphere. This essay will focus on the actions of seeing and being seen in “Fidget” (2000) by Kenneth Goldsmith, “Follow” (2011) by David Buuck and “The Shadow” (1981) by Sophie Calle.

The Self and the Body to Interact with Other People

This essay will use the definitions by John O'Neill, Judith Butler and David W. Krueger to define the self. The sociologist O'Neill argues that our bodies function on the two dimensions; as physical and as communicative. He insists that to look at the human body offers a key perspective to understanding complex human relations to society (3). The body is the basis of the individual sense of self, and at the same time, it is a channel of communication to the world.

Recent critical investigation into the situation of the body as a basis for identity and self has been undertaken further by the poststructuralist feminist critic Judith Butler. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of*

“*Sex*” (1993), Butler identifies a number of concerns about the physical self. She points out the discrepancy between the body and one’s sense of self: “As a projected phenomenon, the body is not merely the source from which projection issues, but is also always a phenomenon in the world, an estrangement from the very ‘I’ who claims it” (17). The present discussion includes the ideas that the body becomes materialized through discourse; the body is an “estrangement from ‘I’ who claims it (17); ‘I’ is a “citation of the place of ‘I’ in speech” (226); only exists when “I” is addressed by others. As Butler states, the body functions as a trigger to produce objective self-awareness, being alienated from the self in various ways.

Krueger states that there are three stages to develop a body self; “early psychic experience of the body,” “the early awareness of a body image, with an integration of inner and outer experience,” and “the integration of the body self as a container of the psychological self,” which involve a cohesive sense of identity (8). The common factor to these statements is that the physical body is a basic component to establish one’s self as people connect the outer world and recognize their inner self by using it.

The three writers in this essay describe their own bodies from the outside. They objectify their bodies and try to redefine their sense of self.

Kenneth Goldsmith’s “Fidget”

In “Fidget,” Kenneth Goldsmith transcribes his bodily gestures from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. on 16th of June in 1997. Recording every physical movement is quite effective to objectify our bodies. People usually use their body parts unconsciously, but Goldsmith breaks through the relationships between body and mind only by writing down material actions. The readers are forced to concentrate on every motion of human body, and to rethink the nature of one’s self.

It is notable that only visible actions are written from 10:00 to 19:00. The aim of this poetry is to observe “a body in space, not *my* body in space. There was to be no editorializing, no psychology, no emotion – just a body detached from a mind” (Goldsmith quoted by Perloff 91). As Goldsmith remarks, there are no expressions of emotions for ten sections. Goldsmith’s representations of the body are unique because the linguistic forms are minimized and written with basic words. This is especially evident in the section 18:00.

Reach. Grasp. Reach. Grab. Hold. Saw. Pull. Hold. Grab. Push. Itch.
Push. Push. Turn. Walk. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight.
Turn. Chew. Massage. Gather. Heavy. Slower. Reach. Open. Swallow.
Exhale. Stand. Burp. Grab. Turn. Pick. Grab. Grab. Grab. Open. Turn.
Walk. Pull. Grasp. Pull. Burn. Grab. Raise. Slump. Dig. Swirl. Cut.
Peel. Chew. Swallow. Push. Stand. Move. Open. Grab. Close. Back.
Forth. Left. Right. Grab. Push. Pull. Sit. Cross. Bring. Right. Chew.
Swallow. Repeat. (59)

This section consists of one-word sentences. There are no modifiers. Only verbs and nouns appear to describe the bodily motions.

Rubén Gallo states that the body in “Fidget” is an “eerie textual” and unusual organism with “some striking characteristics” (52). He discusses the nudity of the body in his essay, pointing out the absence of the representations of clothing. It is interesting that as the words are naked without having any modifier, so the body is naked without clothes, and the space is also naked because there are no depictions of furniture. However, as Gallo argues, the naked body is not erotic at all like the presentation of the body in fashion advertisements, for instance of Dolce and Gabbana (54).

Christopher Schmidt focuses on the function of the anus in this poetry and defines it as a most talkative organ among the body parts because “it can *produce* (in alimentary mode) as well as *consume*, or at least *admit* (in sexual mode)” (31). From his point of view, the depictions of the anus draw the attention of the readers especially in the sexual scene because he inserts his finger into it in order attain ecstasy. However, even in the masturbation scene in the section 13:00, the readers are forced to “see” the body not as a sexual object but as a material. Goldsmith records not only the direct actions to the sexual organs but also the every motion of the other body parts:

Left hand grabs and pulls breast. ... Testicles contract. ... Left bicep grinds. Breathing becomes stronger. Toes curl. Legs lift. Genital area sweats. Legs spread. ... Left breast muscles pulse with arm movements. Profuse sweat appears on chest. Right hand massages belly repeatedly in circular counterclockwise motion. ... Pressure on bladder. Legs stretch out straight. Calf muscles tighten. Buttocks tighten. Sweat. ... Motion stops. Body slumps. Motion resumes. Body rocks back and forth. Knees move rhythmically. Buttocks and thighs jiggle in unison with stroking. Feet lift off ground. Toes point... Facial muscles tighten. Body becomes rigid. ... Testicles tighten. ... Deep breaths. Legs slam. (25–26)

Along with the actions of stroking, the readers watch how muscles contract and the body parts move during the masturbation. These emotionless descriptions function in order to refuse that the readers concentrate sexual action, and to make them overview the biological actions. In this context, it is remarkable that the body in “Fidget” never encounters another body and other people (Gallo 55). The readers have to focus only on the body. The

body is exposed to them as an emotionless material.

In the section of 20:00, however, suddenly “I” appears in the lines. Though Derek Beaulieu emphasizes that Goldsmith records the movements of his body without “ever using the first-person pronoun” (56) and speaking “I” never comes on line and there is “no narration of self-awareness” (56) and Gallo also declares that “the word ‘I’ never appears in the book” (52), definitely “I” speaks: “I mean then a platformed body as does leave somewhat unsteadily,” “Shit I suppose now kisses the balls skeet,” “I’m famous steel,” “Slowing down I quit time,” and “And the eyes from whence I came.” From 10:00, the readers have assimilated and synchronized with the character’s (the author’s) physical movements. It can be said that he lets the reader feel they have the *hyper*body, which shares bodily sense with the other’s (Goldsmith’s). However, he does not allow the readers to follow along with him in this section. The emergence of “I” alienates them abruptly because external physical movements here belong to the “I.” In 21:00, “I” disappears, and at the same time, punctuations also vanish. The readers are forced to reflect on what they are doing and recreate their selfhood.

As Gallo discusses, this process is the conversion of Jacques Lacan’s theory about mirror stage. According to Lacan, before the mirror stage, a child does not recognize his or her body as a unity but fragmented parts because it confuses between self and other. With mirror image and the actual interactions with other people, the child gains “the orthopedic vision of its totality” (Lacan, 4) and starts to develop the sense of self. On the other hand, Goldsmith treats the body as a material and takes it apart. He approaches the new way to discover the self.

Another notable feature of this work is the part of 22:00. The text is run in backwards and the content also goes counter to that of 10:00. For instance, it is much clearer if the first few lines of 10:00 and the last few

lines of 22:00 would be compared carefully:

Eyelids open. Tongue runs across upper lip moving from left side of mouth to right following arc of lip. Swallow. Jaws clench. Grind. Stretch. Swallow. Head lifts. Bent right arm brushes pillow into back of head. (10:00) (5; emphasis mine)

.daeh fo kcab morf yawa wollip sehsubr mra thgir thgiartS .spord daeH
 .wollawS .tcartnoC .dnirG .xaler swaJ .wollawS .pil fo cra gniwolof
tfel ot htuom fo edis thgir morf gnivom pil reppu sсорca snur eugnoT
 Eyelids close. (22:00) (84; emphasis mine)

As can be seen above, almost of all descriptions of right and left are reversed and all actions are done exactly the opposite like “open” and “close.” These sections are a pair of performance of sleep-wake routine actions. Like the Möbius strip, the last section is twisted and glued to the beginning. The structure of “Fidget” draws parallels with routine social behaviour. The social/daily life seems to continue endlessly. However, the readers can now experience the way they move their body parts with an objective eye by gaining Goldsmith’s consciousness of mundane details.

David Buuck’s “Follow”

Goldsmith materializes his body through his own eyes and shows all, including his sexual propensity. On the other hand, David Buuck uses the other’s eyes to objectify himself, and, at the same time, he refuses to expose everything.

Buuck’s “Follow” is based on the document written by the private detective, Mike Kellerman, who reported the author’s daily life around 20th

of January in 2007. The “subject,” Buuck, was always conscious of being surveilled by the detective. This performance is comparable to the contemporary people who come to do their daily activities with an awareness of the potential to upload the pictures and the texts to social media such as Facebook and Instagram, and to be seen by others. Especially nowadays, being regarded is one of important processes of self-recognition.

It is remarkable that David Buuck is the founder of BARGE (the Bay Area Research Group in Enviro-aesthetics), which has organized many (de) tours, actions, and installations around the San Francisco Bay Area from 2003. BARGE has investigated political issues of environmentalism, surveillance, gentrification, and other conflicts over public space. Along with social problems, Buuck has been interested in the US over surveillance and its effects on citizens. He recognizes cynically that American culture has the “hysterical biopolitics of surveillance” and American give themselves “over to the state machinery of surveillance in the bargain” (“Julio Caesar Morales”). “Follow” can be read as one of his actions to satirize this US situation.

After the terrorists’ attacks in 11th of September in 2001, as Buuck marks ironically, people in America have been placed under observation by the state. Six weeks after the attacks, the US Congress passed the USA PATRIOT (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act. Because of this law, the government has an authority to “spy” on their citizens. Among the citizens themselves, there is also a rising consciousness on security.

The numbers of Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras increased rapidly and they are found throughout most of the cities not only in America but also in the big cities across the worlds such as London and Paris. According to a survey, even before 9/11 the number of CCTV surveillance

grew dramatically in America. After 9/11, however, commencing with Chicago, many cities planned to install surveillance cameras in public spheres (Norris, McCahill and Wood 114). A survey conducted from 19th to 24th of September in 2001 revealed that 63 percent of the adult agreed with “Expanded camera surveillance on streets and in public places” (“Privacy: What Americans Think”). People’s fear for the terrorist attacks led a rapidly expanding of usage of CCTV. After 9/11 the term surveillance appeared in people’s everyday conversations and people became much familiar to biometrics, CCTV and information sharing than before (Hier and Greenberg 6).

It is noteworthy that the title is not “Being Followed” but “Follow.” Buuck gives much attention to the actions to watch to find out what happens. His writing style is fixed as it is a report because the perspective of this poetry must be from point of view of “follower.” “Follow” shows that nobody knows who has what dangerous idea just by seeing outside. He replaces many words with “(REDACTED)” in his work. Because of this, the readers cannot know and “see” what the subject (Buuck) was doing. For instance, he purposely deletes the names of products he had: “Subject, with (REDACTED) in hand...” (127); “He pulls small (REDACTED) from his pocket and places in his mouth” (127). These things are possibly a gun, a drug, a cigarette or a pen. “Follow” shows that surveillance does not always define things correctly.

The detective describes only Buuck’s appearance and the fact which can be seen: “Subject is a Caucasian male, mid 30’s, approximately (REDACTED) tall, slim build wearing (REDACTED), brown cap, and marron work boots” (127). Similarly, the person whom Buuck talks with is also portrayed only his physical feature: “mid 30’s, approximately (REDACTED) tall with long light brown or dark blonde hair, wearing

(REDACTED) with neck scarf, white (REDACTED) and blue jeans” (127). Along with the body height, Buuck deletes the features of clothes they wear. To see what kind of clothes people wear helps to know their social classes or their personality.³⁾ Hence, Buuck’s hiding the references on clothes emphasizes that we never know other people’s inner self just by looking the appearance and it is difficult to judge or evaluate somebody else.

Buuck’s action to manipulate the report reminds the redacted documents by the government. He excludes the date and the proper names of streets, places, shops, cars or belongings. For example, the American Civil Liberties Union obtains nine hundred pages of heavily redacted documents about the surveillance of US citizens from the government through a court battle in 2010 (Hsu). Because of the article by *The Washington Post*, many people come to know that they are under the expanded surveillance authority powers, and fired up debate over this problem. Buuck might parody this political issue as well.

On 5th and 6th of June in 2013, around two years after the publication of “Follow,” *The Guardian* reported that American government had surveilled on the phone and the Internet records of millions of American, based on the interview and the documents provided by Edward Snowden, who was the former US National Security Agency (NSA) contractor and worked for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Snowden continuously revealed top-secret about the American government, for instance, they had hacked Chinese computers since 2009, and accessed to the network of the phone calls and the Internet traffic in the world in order to get personal information (Gidda). Even after Snowden leaked the NSA programs, according to opinion polls, most Americans still accept these surveillance actions (Welch, 30–31). Buuck’s poetry is still throwing the question to the contemporary people whether the situation is what they want.

In the website “Buuck/BARGE,” he remarks that the report of surveillance makes him realize how the writer’s life is boring, but at the same time, he also finds out that it has a potential to reveal the issue of self:

Still, an interesting trial run at a poetics of surveillance, where the self & its expressions (self-portraiture, autobiography, confessional poem, etc.) are increasingly crafted by other mediated means, often with our consent (i.e. what I feed ‘them’ thru my internet usage, electronic purchases, public movements, etc.) I am I because my little machine knows me...

Buuck points out that the people who are followed might actually give their information to the followers without letting their real self out. In the age when personal information is easily exposed by the Internet, SNS and surveillance systems, one’s sense of self is much complicated than before. However, at the same time, only they themselves know that “I am I.”

Sophie Calle’s “The Shadow”

As Craig Dworkin and Goldsmith mention, Buuck’s way of self-recognition is similar to that in Sophie Calle’s “The Shadow” (125–26). Like Buuck, Calle hires a private detective to follow her all day long, document her daily activities and take photos of her without letting him know that she employed him. Calle publishes “The Shadow” in *Double Game* (1999), a collaboration between her work and the novel of *Leviathan* (1992) by Paul Auster. Auster creates the character named Maria Turner, using Calle’s some episodes and artworks. She emphasizes Paul Auster’s thanks to Calle by circling his words: “The author extends special thanks to Sophie Calle for permission to mingle fact with fiction.” In return, Calle decides to live her

life in his book, saying that “The author extends special thanks to Paul Auster for permission to mingle fact with fiction.” As the title of the book suggests, doubleness is a key for her art works. In “The Shadow,” in addition to fiction and reality, she is obsessed with seeing and being seen. Auster perceives her loyalty to this topic and puts it into Maria’s characteristic.

Her subject was the eye, the drama of watching and being watched, and her pieces exhibited the same qualities one found in Maria herself: meticulous attention to detail, a reliance on arbitrary structures, patience bordering on the unendurable. (63)

Her action to invert these relationships (fiction and fact, and observing and being observed) functions to blur a border between them.

“The Shadow” is an echo of her previous work “Suite Vénitienne” (1980). In “Suite Vénitienne,” Calle follows a stranger in the street and investigates his private trip in Venice for twelve days, disguising herself with a blond bobbed wig, hats, veils, gloves and sunglasses. As a result of acting not to be found out by the subject, she needs to confirm her existence and gets self-consciousness by being seen from others and seeing them.

While she is followed, to the detective, Calle shows her favourite streets and places she loves, for example, Jardin du Luxembourg, where she played as a child and did her first kiss. She went so far as to set her hair in hairdresser’s salon to please the detective. The aim of this performance is to get the evidence of her existence (122–23). Calle tries to confirm her existence by being observed by others. Like Buuck’s detective does, her follower describes the subject (Calle): “She is dressed in a gray raincoat, gray trousers, and wears black shoes with stockings of the same color. She carries a yellow shoulder bag” (128). It is a definite and steady presence of

Calle as can be seen in her own memo: “I am wearing gray suede breeches, black tights, black shoes, and a gray raincoat. Over my shoulder a bright yellow bag, a camera” (124). She always worries whether the detective surely follows her because she needs others who objectify and evaluate her actions. For Calle, her unstable “I” needs to be concretized into one stable “self” by someone else.

The most different feature of Calle’s work from Buuck’s is whether they demonstrate the inner thoughts or not. Calle writes about her feelings while she was surveilled whilst Buuck never expresses to the readers what is on the mind. As studied above, “Follow” reveals that we cannot understand anything in depth just by observing the appearances of others. In contrast, Calle shows off what she does because she wants the observer to get to know more about her. This is because she tries to develop her sense of self by depending on others. Jean Baudrillard remarks the possibility of the disappearance of the ego-self because of the co-dependency between the follower and the followed in his essay on “*Suite Vénitienne*.”

To follow the other is to take charge of his itinerary; it is to watch over his life without him knowing it. It is to play the mythical role of the shadow, which, traditionally, follows you and protects you from the sun—the man without a shadow is exposed to the violence of a life without mediation – it is to relieve him of that existential burden, the responsibility for his own life. Simultaneously, she who follows is herself relieved of responsibility for her own life as she follows blindly in the footsteps of the other. Again, a wonderful reciprocity exists in the cancellation of each existence, in the cancellation of each subject’s tenuous position as a subject. Following the other, one replaces him, exchanges lives, passions, wills, transforms oneself in the other’s stead.

It is perhaps the only way man can finally fulfill himself. An ironic way but all the more certain. (82)

He notes that there is no inherent self-existence as the follower and the followed share the same life. Calle expects the other to spend the same time, to form a picture of her and to create her sense of self together. It can be seen in her thoughts at 2:00 p.m. and at 5:25 p.m.: “Now I trust him. I’m not afraid of losing him anymore. I’ve become a part of the life of X, private detective. I structured his day, Thursday, April 16, in much the same way that he has influenced mine” (126); “I only think of ‘him.’ Is he enjoying this scattered, diffuse, and ephemeral day I have offered him – our day?” (126). Here, she trusts him as a person who creates her self together. Describing Thursday, April 16 in 1981 as “our” day, she obtains living proof by sharing space and time with others. After 6:00 p.m., the report by X is greatly different from Calle’s memo. In her note, she left the theatre at 6 p.m., showed her father to X at 7 p.m., went to a party with her friend at 8 p.m., returned to her friend’s hotel at 5 a.m. in next morning and slept thinking of X. On the other hand, the detective reports that she left the cinema at 7:25 p.m. and took a train, and went back her home at 8:00 p.m. According to François M, whom Calle asked to follow the detective, he seemed to watch another movie after he checked the ending time of “Lili Marleen”. He must lost her because she left earlier than he expected. However, the argument on what is fact does not matter for Calle because Calle’s shadow which X creates is also herself.

In contrast to Buuck’s “Follow,” Calle considers being seen as positive. Buuck depicts the situation that people can objectify their self-awareness. However, at the same time, he throws a question about the validity of evaluation by others. She uses other people’s views to create her own

subjectivity. One of the reasons why their works have such a different perspective even though they use the same topic, surveillance, is their sex. Carole Spitzack states that especially female bodies are always visible and judged by some unknown (male) observer. Women develop their self-awareness through other people's eyes. In addition, the most important distinction between them is Calle's unstable identity. In *Leviathan*, Auster defines Maria (Calle) as a complex artist:

Maria was an artist, but the work she did had nothing to do with creating objects commonly defined as art. Some people called her a photographer, others referred to her as a conceptualist, still others considered her a writer, but none of these descriptions was accurate, and in the end I don't think she can be pigeonholed in any way. (60)

Like Maria, Calle has an identity crisis because she cannot be classified into one category. To use Auster's words, she realizes her "shifting nature of the self" (78). In consequence, she explores her selfhood by watching and being watched.

Conclusion

As this essay has studied, these writers describe mundane actions. Their words do not show great originality: Goldsmith just writes a transcript of bodily activities, Buuck edits the report replacing some words with "REDACTED," and Calle shows the records and the photos about her flânerie on one day from three people's points of view. However, their works succeed in giving a question about the selfhood to people today who are obsessed with seeing and being seen. Craig Dworkin defines the conceptual poetry as the least abstract and the idea of language in the concept behind

the conceptual works is “quantifiable data” (xxxvi). As Dworkin states, there are no meanings in the words in these three poetries because they are the data of the authors’ actions which are cut out from the daily lives. In contrast to traditional language based poetries, the conceptual writings do not allow the readers to interpret the writers’ sentiments or intensions. By “looking” through these words (or the data), the readers get new experience to rethink about their own bodies and selfhood.

Notes

- 1) Jan Aart Scholte refers to the definition of “globalization,” pointing out the five conceptions, such as internationalization, liberalization, universalization, westernization (or modernization) and deterritorialization (15–16). Each of these definitions is different in terms of what it emphasizes. Nevertheless, they share similarity in that they state that it is difficult to draw territorial boundaries in the contemporary world.
- 2) As of July in 2022, early 3 billion people use Facebook, around 2.5 billion people are YouTube users, over 1.4 billion people use Instagram constantly, and 1 billion are using TikTok (Dixson).
- 3) Julia Twigg points out that there is strong connection between clothing and identity, especially in the postmodern world, because people are obsessed with the problems of identity (2).

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