

Doug Hall

Thoughts on Neighborhood Watch

“The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds of which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers . . . whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that can’t be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms.”¹

To look down on the city is to place it at a distance, to miniaturize it, to make it appear graspable even as it is beyond the grasp. To see the world as a panorama is to control it with the eyes. Spaces that we had known, buildings that we had seen from the street, all that had been too familiar become abstracted, wrapped in air, tapestries for the imagination. This absence from specificity frees us from the fragments of detail, the myriad signs that proclaim significance by demanding interaction, interpretation, and responsibility. Instead of many images we have *one image*, the city laid out as tableau, neighborhoods blending into one another, boundaries disappearing, a picture of homogeneity. It’s a view that comes with a privilege.

As an American visiting Rio de Janeiro I was surprised to discover the *favelas*, dense clusters of dilapidated tar-paper, cardboard, wood, and sheet-metal shacks, not along the river beds and other low lying terrain – where I had imagined them to be – but on the highest hills overlooking the city. In American cities the hills are reserved for the wealthy. In San Francisco it’s Pacific Heights, in Boston it’s Beacon Hill, in Cleveland it’s Shaker Heights, which is more of a metaphoric hill than an actual one since Ohio is chronically flat; and in New York City one goes to the wealthiest part of the city by going ‘up town’ to the Upper East Side (going beyond ‘uptown’ brings one to Harlem which is never referred to as ‘going up town,’ only as ‘going to Harlem’).

¹ Michael de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, part III, chapter VII, translation Steven F. Rendall, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1984, p.93.



Neighborhood Watch

1995, grid consisting of 10 prints

(1 chromogenic print, 9 digital iris prints)

total dimension: 161.3 x 174 cm

Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco



Neighborhood Watch

1995, detail

To scrutinize the city at close range is to see it in fragments. To view it from above and to dissect it with camera and digital technology is to fragmentize it with impunity. Although no longer perceived as homogenous, it is still the city looked down upon, assessed from a safe and distant vantage point. (Of course the ultimate distancing of space is the map, which defines geography, not in terms of the psychology or interaction of its habitants, but only in regard to an abstracted terrain of natural and man-made spaces which are represented as disengaged from any kind of 'psycho-geography'.)

The kind of 'mapping' that is made possible with the camera and the computer in *Neighborhood Watch* would appear to combine the pathology of the voyeur (the looker who disavows looking even as it is being eroticized) with the sincerity



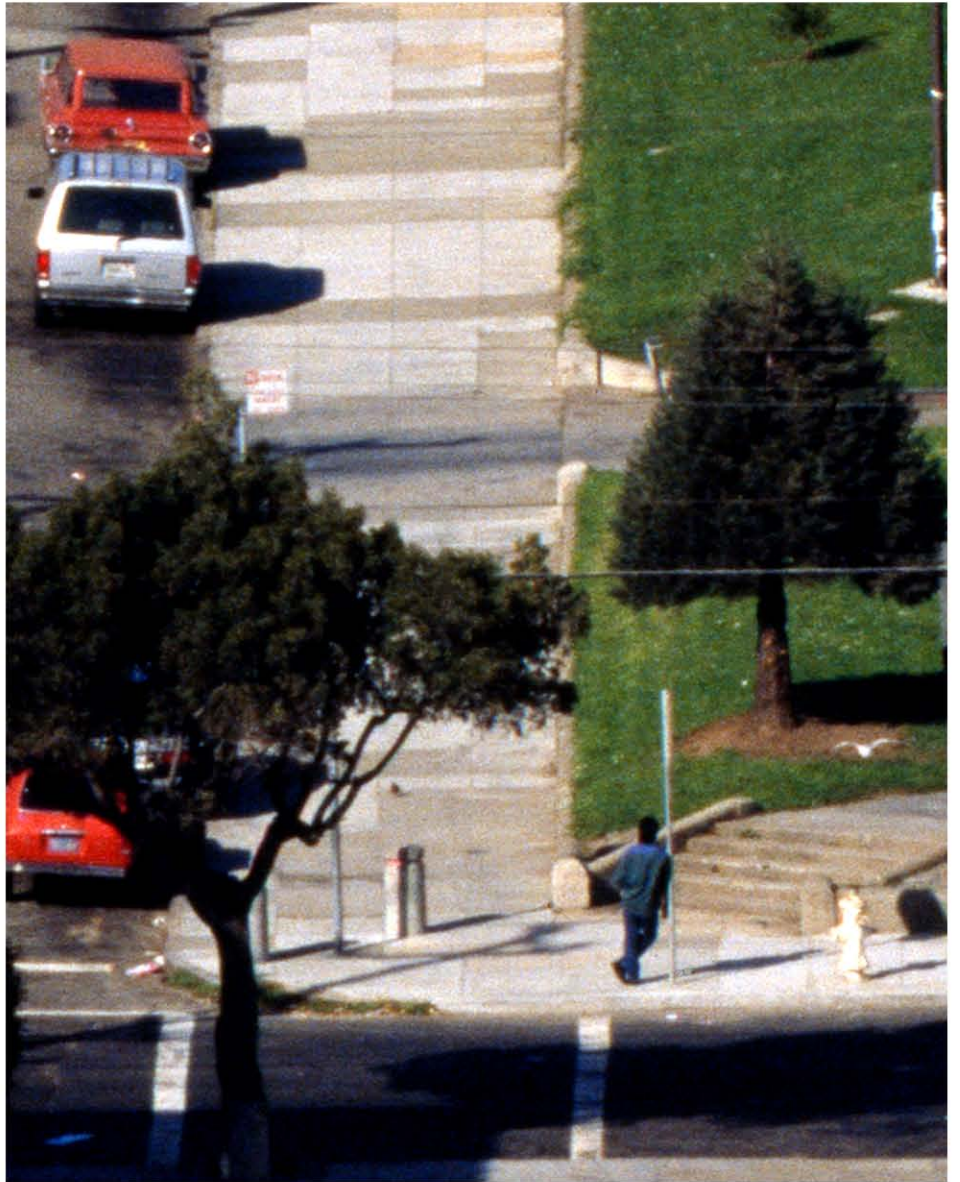
Neighborhood Watch
1995, detail

of 'the *dériveur*' (the looker who celebrates looking by treating it ontologically and as a means to interpretation). In either case, one senses a certain perversity: the aggressive subjectivity of the viewer, who possesses through vision, and the involuntary passivity of those viewed who become, along with their surroundings, the catalysts for the thoughts and fantasies of another.

Until recently, a person captured unawares on film was simply an image. With the advent of computer imaging, however – with its further reduction of information into pixels – the image has become data: more abstract and malleable than when frozen into the emulsions that compose likenesses on the surfaces of photographic film. And, being more malleable, it is data that can be put to wider, and perhaps more insidious, kinds of use.

It is the computer's ability to treat all information, regardless of its content, as data, indiscriminately and non-hierarchically, that is both liberating and ominous. For artists and other obsessed lookers, the computer allows an ease with information and undermines the viability of historically based distinctions between text and image or of distinctions between images that are founded solely on the tools of their creation. Once imported into the computer, moving and still images, and sounds become undifferentiated bits that can be merged into countless hybrids. While offering nearly limitless possibilities for engaging, sorting, and restructuring information, this model of fluidity has its dark side.

In the cases of Benjamin's 'flaneur' and Debord's 'dériveur,' we see models for urban observation that involve physical interaction with the environment and the people in it. Here the degree of knowledge one can attain has a direct relationship to the depth of real time engagement – of people, of places, of situations. It is information with risk: the viewer is exposed, can quickly become the viewed, and is made responsible, by virtue of the vulnerability that comes with visibility, for the act of looking. With digital technology, on the other hand, where images, words, virtual spaces are instantly accessible on a computer terminal and, with a key stroke, can be distorted and recontextualized, one becomes a flaneur of virtual space, the distant, invisible viewer – the controller and manipulator of information who pays no price for watching. This is riskless looking: the privileged view, raised to new heights.



Neighborhood Watch
1995, detail