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D E C O N S T R U C T I N G

T H E W O R K S O F M A N N

BY SUE BOWNESS

TORONTO'S SOLITARY CYBORG SHOOTS
BACK AT SURVEILLANCE CULTURE

Steve Mann, a University of Toronto engineering professor who has been living as a cyborg for thirty years, thinks we should question technology. Through his theoretical experiments, art installations, and by personal example, he urges us to be aware of our vulnerability to various technologies — in particular the camera's lens. In his book *Cyborg: Digital Destiny and Human Possibility in the Age of the Wearable Computer* (with Hal Niedzviecki; Canada: Doubleday, 2001), Mann outlines his various experiments. He also considers their larger implications, delving into issues such as the decaying boundaries between private and public spaces. By introducing important ideas such as "shooting back", "sousveillance", "coteveillance", and other strategies for resisting the camera's all-consuming gaze, Mann equips his readers not only with a new vocabulary. He also offers a profound philosophical framework for exploring the impact that technology and surveillance have on individuals, and on society as a whole.

SHOOTING BACK

In 1994, Mann became the first person in the world to continuously broadcast his everyday life onto the World Wide Web, by streaming images of everything he saw using a device called the Wearable Wireless Webcam, or "WearComp". Visitors to his site saw everything that the cyborg saw, from his perspective, through this head-mounted camera. In a sense, they got to "be Steve Mann." And though many other Web-casters would soon follow in his footsteps (*JenniCam*, *AnaCam*, *questionGirl*), their undertakings proved merely voyeuristic. On sites like *JenniCam*, a young woman became the subject, actively giving up her privacy for the sake of intentional voyeurism. But the *MannCam* shone no such spotlight. His character-less story demanded far more from viewers who, in the absence of consistent subjects, were themselves implicated as central to the story. If there was nobody to watch, why were they watching?

This is a theme that Mann has explored in many subsequent projects, forcing his audiences to question the necessity of surveillance, and weigh its negative aspects (diminished privacy, dehumanization) against questionable benefits (heightened safety, protection from crime). Mann was doing more than just broadcasting images — he was engaging in a practice that he called "self-surveillance". By turning the camera on himself, he lived out experiences that interrogated notions of what privacy is, and how privacy actually functions in today's interconnected society.

While exploring the implications of living his life online, Mann also used the WearComp experiment to explore the tensions between watcher and watched, by covertly reversing these roles or "shooting back". In his Web cast documentary project, *ShootingBack*, Mann would enter an area under surveillance (like a gas station or pizza parlour) wearing his *EyeTap* (a pair of sunglasses equipped with a hidden camera, allowing one of Mann's eyes to function as a digital recording device) and shoot the public camera filming him. Often, he would openly question the business' right to film him without his permission — an objection that most employees would field by deferring to some higher authority, like a manager. When Mann would respond by pulling out his own handheld video camera (though he'd already been filming the scene covertly), those same employees would often express distress at being filmed themselves — sometimes to the point of violence.

In his book, Mann explains that he was engaging in *sousveillance*: a term he has coined to describe the practice (or perhaps defence) of observing the official observer — “watching the watcher” — and thus inverting the surveillance relationship. Mann describes the overall situation in which both he and the system surveyed each other simultaneously as *coteveillance* (from the French a *cote*, or beside) — a dynamic somewhat akin to what happens in a small town or household, wherein everyone watches everyone else (or “shoots sideways”), and social protocols are established via a form of consensus.

Mann’s thwarted attempts to observe the observer show us that the surveillance relationship is unbalanced. Most rights of observation rest in the hands of the state or corporation, and few remain in the hands of the individual. In his book, Mann encourages citizens to engage in acts of shooting back, in order to “use the machine against itself, to turn the tables.” When more and more people adopt the role of the observer (and the technology that allows them to do so), the power of observation is distributed and decentralized — a process that he calls *diffusion*.

MAYBE, MAYBE NOT

Prompted by the increasing ubiquity of hidden surveillance cameras, particularly cameras sequestered behind the opaque ceiling domes so common in many retail outlets, Mann and his students created their own line of “opaque dome fashions”. These were shirts, backpacks, necklaces, and dresses with similar plastic domes affixed to them, indicating the possible presence of a Web streaming video camera beneath their wine-dark surface. Some of these outfits contained functioning cameras, some didn’t (the wearer didn’t know either way). This enabled the wearer, if asked by a store clerk whether they were filming the store, to reply, “Honestly, I don’t know.”

This was one of Mann’s many experiments with “maybe” cameras —extremely obvious devices that may or may not contain functional cameras, creating uncertainty in others about whether or not they are being watched. Regarding the potential effectiveness of “maybe” cameras, Mann puts it this way in his book: “Is the camera on the computer I’m wearing actually broadcasting? Well, do you feel lucky? That someone —anyone —might be equipped with a hidden WebCam would, I believe, be a strong disincentive for those tempted to abuse authority.”

This is reminiscent of the 19th century panopticon prison designed by Jeremy Bentham and discussed at length by Michael Foucault (in *Discipline and Punish*, 1975), in which prisoners are isolated but permanently visible to unseen prison guards. Thus, constant observation is assumed; prisoners are never sure when or even if they are being watched, and fear encourages them to be on their best behaviour. Mann notes that Foucault’s analysis of the panopticon’s gradual extension beyond the prison’s walls into mainstream society (evidenced by secret police, hidden cameras, dossiers and data banks) basically chronicles the emergence of today’s sur

veillance society. Somehow, even while we know we are being observed constantly, we accept it because we believe it serves our own good. In Mann's view, this makes us settle for a sort of "pseudo-privacy" — we know the cameras are filming, but we don't ask to see the images. If we ignore the products of surveillance, we can more easily pretend that it is not a problem.

FINAL DECONTAMINATION

Against the backdrop of society's recent preoccupation with terror, threats to national security, and contaminants like anthrax, Mann presented his latest art contribution — an exhibit dubbed *DECON3: Deconstructing and Decontextualizing Decontamination* — for one night only on August 29, 2002, at a downtown location near the University of Toronto. In this installation, participants were asked to remove their various layers of identity — first technological devices like cell phones or cameras, then personal effects such as jewellery, then clothing — until they were naked. Then participants were washed and fitted with uniform white jumpsuits, with no pockets in which to conceal contraband. In this step by step procedure, each successive request was made to seem reasonable. Yet, by the end of the decontamination process, the participants had been fully stripped of any identity or context — and, essentially, humanity — that they may have possessed before entering *DECON3*. They had also been stripped, or decontaminated, of any technologies capable of "shooting back", and thus threatening authoritarian power. This process illustrated the ways in which our small concessions to privacy eventually add up.

Standing naked, without the material means to distinguish oneself as anything more than a human body, is not a pleasant experience for some. In our minds, we are more than just human bodies — we are human *beings*. Steve Mann invites us to recognise that being constantly observed and superficially categorised (via video cameras, automatic face recognition, iris scans) has the effect of reducing us to mere bodies randomly captured on videotape, customers rather than people, numbers rather than personalities. By accepting complicity in the surveillance system, we permit our own subjugation to machines and the corporate bodies that deem them necessary for our protection, our own good. The question that Steve Mann asks in all of his projects is: What, or who, are we protecting ourselves from? And is the protection we gain worth the privacy we give up?

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