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How do you like being watched?

World sousveillance day: Activists turn the tables on surveillance cameras

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Video surveillance screens at Vancouver International Airport. With events like World Sousveillance Day, Toronto activist Steve Mann wants to make a point about personal freedom and one's right to privacy.

A man wearing two cameras is walking through the Toronto Eaton Centre. One of the cameras rests on his head; the other is strapped to his chest. I'm walking beside him. It is Christmas Eve, just before noon. The man with the cameras is Steve Mann, a faculty member with the University of Toronto's Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering. The two of us are taking part in an unusual bit of activism called World Sousveillance Day (WSD).

We're all familiar with the word "surveillance," meaning "to observe from above." And we've all noticed those video surveillance cameras silently panning and tilting while we walk through our local shopping mall. "Sousveillance" means "to observe from below." But that doesn't mean, as Mann pointed out to me, installing cameras on the floor. The aim is rather to take cameras and spend a little time watching the same instruments of surveillance that watch us. And that is what WSD is all about.

In order to get an idea of what to expect on WSD, the night before I'd read part of Mann's recent book Cyborg: Digital Destiny and Human Possibility in the Age of the Wearable Computer (co-authored with journalist Hal Niedzviecki). In it, Mann details some past adventures in sousveillance-type activity. "Whenever I found myself in a store [with surveillance cameras]," Mann writes, "I asked management why they were taking pictures of me without my permission. They would typically ask me why I was so paranoid and tell me that only criminals are afraid of cameras ... Then I would pull an ordinary camcorder out of my satchel and give them a chance to define themselves."

Sousveillance, Mann has discovered, carries some risks. Mann claims he was once "physically assaulted and unlawfully detained" by gas station attendants after taking out his camcorder. He reflects on how "the same people who claimed that only criminals were afraid of cameras had an instantly paranoid (and sometimes violent) reaction" at the slightest hint that he'd had the gall to conduct surveillance of them.

According to Ronald Deibert, another WSD organizer who also teaches at the University of Toronto, 2002 was the 4th year that people observed WSD. It's an international affair -- activists in such places as Japan, the U.K., and the United States mark the occasion annually. WSD organizers such as Deibert want the event to "raise awareness about the increasing proliferation of all forms of surveillance -- not just of video cameras," he told me. Deibert also directs the Citizen Lab, which examines ways in which individuals can use "applied activism" (like sousveillance) to promote political and personal freedom.

Deibert thinks WSD has a special relevance these days, given increasing public concern about the "consequences" of the anti-terrorist legislation passed all over the industrialized world in the wake of Sept. 11. He says the new regulations, in many cases, are "poorly thought out." Ideally, he says, WSD can help spark a discussion about how we need to strike a balance between security, surveillance and privacy as the war on terror moves ahead.

WSD is only one way people can express their dislike of being under constant surveillance in public places. The New York Surveillance Camera Players have pioneered another interesting form of protest. Instead of photographing video cameras, SCP performs specially adapted versions of famous plays under their unblinking gaze. The SCP troupe has played many times since 1996 to anonymous audiences of New York policemen and private security guards who monitor the cameras. Their Web site (http://www.notbored.org/the-scp.html) has useful information for those thinking of staging their own security camera dramas. To perform Beckett's Waiting for Godot, for example, SCP says you will need to have "two actors, wearing signs that identify them as ESTRAGON and VLADIMIR, respectively, sit or kneel beneath a third actor who is wearing a sign that says THE TREE." The directions are simple: "Estragon and Vladimir knock each other around, switch positions, chase each other around the tree, etc." The SCP's amusing site has additional synopses for works by Orwell, Poe and Jerzy Kosinski.

As Mann and I strolled through the Eaton Centre on our WSD outing, I recalled a provocative section from his book. "Should we simply place absolute trust in authority?" Mann writes. "It's hard to place absolute trust in organizations that don't trust us."

There was only one anxious moment during my WSD experience. That came when Mann stood in front of a sign in the Eaton Centre that explicitly prohibits photography, and snapped a picture of it using the camera on his chest. I half-expected an army of security guards to descend on us, but no one did. Still, Mann's action did illustrate what WSD was trying to highlight: the hypocrisy of all those who want to monitor the movement of law-abiding people, but at the same time exempt themselves from being monitored by those whom they watch.

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