

“Sousveillance”

Inverse Surveillance in Multimedia Imaging

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ABSTRACT

This is a personal narrative that began 30 years ago as a childhood hobby, of wearing and implanting various sensors, effectors, and multimedia computation in order to re-define personal space and modify sensory perception computationally. This work involved the creation of various computational seeing aids that evolved into a new kind of visual art, using multimedia cyborglogs. Becoming at one with the machine, the author was able to explore a new humanity at the nexus of cyberspace and the real world. The author presents what was discovered accidentally, as a result of facing “cyborg discrimination”. In particular, over the past 30 years, peer discrimination has decreased, while institutional and organized discrimination has intensified. Most notably, it was discovered that cyborg discrimination was most intense in establishments having the most surveillance. Rather than avoid such establishments, the author was able to explore and capture unique aspects to understand surveillance in new ways. The word *sur-veillance* denotes a God’s eye view from on high (i.e. French for “to watch from above”). An inverse, called *sous-veillance* (French for “to watch from below”) explores what happens when cameras move from lamp posts and ceilings down to eye level. Finally, it is suggested that new personal multimedia technologies, like mass-produced wearable cameraphones, can be used as tools for artists to explore “*equiveillance*” by shifting this equilibrium between surveillance and sousveillance with inverse/reverse accountability/recountability/continuability of continuous sur/sousveillance.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.5 [Computer Applications]: ARTS AND HUMANITIES—*Fine arts*

General Terms

Design, Experimentation, Performance, Theory, Verification

Keywords

surveillance, inverse surveillance, sousveillance, weblog, cyborglog, computer mediated reality, eyetap, equiveillance, terrorism, guerrorism, survey, sousvey, perveillance

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What is sousveillance?

SURveillance (“eye-in-the-sky”) versus SOUSveillance: bringing cameras from the heavens, “down to earth”.



The word “Surveillance” is French for “to watch from above”. It typically describes situations where person(s) of higher authority (e.g. security guards, department store owners, or the like) watch over citizens, suspects, or shoppers. The higher authority has often been said to be “Godlike” rather than down at the same level as the individual party or parties under surveillance [Foucault 1977]. In this paper, surveillance is defined as the capture of multimedia content (audio, video, or the like), by a higher entity that is not a peer of, or a party to, the activity being recorded.

The author has suggested “*sous-veillance*” as French for “to watch from below”. The term “*sousveillance*” refers both to hierarchical sousveillance, e.g. citizens photographing police, shoppers photographing shopkeepers, and taxi-cab passengers photographing cab drivers, as well as personal sousveillance (bringing cameras from the lamp posts and ceilings, down to eye-level, for human-centered recording of personal experience).

It should be noted that the two aspects of sousveillance (hierarchy reversal and human-centeredness) often interchange, e.g. the driver of a cab one day, may be a passenger in someone else’s cab the next day.

Thus a main feature of “*sousveillance*” as a tool for multimedia artists is effortless capture, processing, storage, recall,

and transmission of an activity by a participant in the activity.

Disclaimer the role of the individual artist and personal passion outside the traditional academic laboratory: Because this paper describes the author’s own personal experiences of inventing, designing, building, and living with a variety of body borne computer-based visual information capture, processing, and mediation devices in everyday life, there is a necessary narrative element that would be diminished if it were forced to conform to the objectivity usually found in a scholarly article.

The practice beginning in the author’s childhood, involved 30 years of bearable (wearable, implantable/dermaplantable, and body/brain modification) systems and devices. This practice would outstrip a normal ethics review process, so a certain element of this work reaches beyond the traditional manner of scientific explorations, perhaps more into the domain traditionally reserved for the Fine Arts. The arts is one of the few places where there exists an accepted practice of performance art, body art, body modification (like the sex change experiment of Professor Sandy Stone, Eduardo Kac’s microchip implanted in the body¹, the “Cyborgian Primitives” movement), and the like.

0.1 Computer Mediated Reality

Since the 1970s the author has been exploring electronically mediated environments using body-borne computers. These explorations in Computer Mediated Reality were an attempt at creating a new way of experiencing the perceptual world, using a variety of different kinds of sensors, transducers, and other body-borne devices controlled by a wearable computer [7].

0.2 Practical Applications

Early on, the author recognized the utility of computer mediated perception (computationally modified presentation of sensory data). For this kind of work, the author invented a device that intercepted rays of eyeward bound light, and resynthesized (typically with a computer-controlled laser) substitute rays so that the resynthesized rays could be collinear with the measured rays. This resulted in a device where three elements existed at the same point in space: (1) the effective center of projection of a camera or other sensor; (2) the convergence point of the above collinear rays of light; and (3) at least one eye of the wearer. Thus the device is equivalent to putting both a camera and a display inside the eye. Such a device, fitted to one or both eyes, is called an EyeTap device [7].

EyeTap devices can be used for electric seeing aids, or when used together with a similar device called the EarTap, for converting the body, in effect, into a camera phone.

0.3 Personal Safety Device

The author’s mediated reality devices also included the capability of lifelong capture and transmission of physiological signals together with the EyeTap signal. Capture of the data can allow such a system to function much like the “black box” flight recorder in an aircraft that provides evi-

¹Others, such as Kevin Warwick, have also followed in Kac’s footsteps, some for artistic reasons like Kac, and others for more utilitarian reasons.

dence as to why an accident or deliberate violent act occurred.

To protect the data of the “black box” life recorder from accidental or malicious damage, the data has generally been transmitted and recorded at remote locations. Additionally, for example, transmission of synchronized timestamped ECG data allows a remote physician to observe not only the electrical heart activity, but also the visual environment which may provide clues as to environmental causes of ECG irregularities such as arrhythmia.

When it is worn continuously (e.g. out of medical necessity to capture valid data) the long-term adaptation to seeing through the device also provides a unique opportunity to capture, process, store, and recall visual memories. Unlike a mere wearable camera, the EyeTap, because it becomes a manner of seeing, captures exactly what the bearer does see. This results in a new kind of EyeTap cinematographic vision, together with a serendipitously generated logfile that happens without conscious thought or effort.

A cyborg (in the Manfred Clynes sense of a technological synergy that doesn’t require conscious thought or effort), can thus generate a lifelong logfile for personal experience capture. Such a logfile is called a cyborglog (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CyborgLog>).

Later with the advent of the World Wide Web cyborglogs also became weblogs [Ito 2004], an example of which is shown in Fig 1.

Ironically, the coverage of the East Campus fire (Fig 1) resulted in negative press

Wearable Web Camera Goes Too Far, Anders Hove, Executive Editor,

www-tech.mit.edu/Issue/V116/N28/mann.28c.html from the very paper that might have used the pictures captured in the cyborglog. It is interesting to note that Hove’s first main objection was the strange physical appearance (to use his words it’s “worse than Spandex, tweed, and bell-bottoms combined”), rather than the privacy issues. This was an objection also raised when the author had driver’s license pictures and passport pictures taken, and finally succeeded in making a legal argument as to why self-modification of physical appearance must be accepted, after which a number of passports and driver’s licenses were issued with the author’s newly created physical appearance.

In particular, living within a permanently installed/institled photographic perspective allows the bearer to capture precious yet serendipitous moments in life, such as the birth of a newborn, or baby’s first steps.

0.4 Related work

Despite the initial negative reactions, a lot of good came of the explorations in web-based cyborglogs (time-stamped diaries of serendipitous personal experience recordings made available to the world). Others are also now proposing similar projects. Industry is also recognizing the importance of inverse surveillance. For example, the Hitachi Design Center in Milano recently sponsored an event entitled “*Applied Dreams Workshop 3: 'Surveillance and Sousveillance'*”.

Nokia is planning a “life ’blog” (lifelong weblog) product similar to the author’s life ’glog (lifelong cyborglog) project. Microsoft’s “sensecam” and “MyLifeBits” projects (<http://research.microsoft.com/CARPE2004/>) and Hewlett

