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Steve Mann combines ingenuity and politics.

CYBORG SENSATION

CYBER-GURU STEVE MANN OPENS DIGIFEST

BY JOSEPH WILSON

DIGIFEST 2004: ON THE MOVE An international celebration of digital culture, Thursday and Friday (May 13-14) at the Design Exchange (234 Bay), Saturday (May 15) at the Ontario Science Centre (770 Don Mills), Sunday (May 16) at Harbourfront's York Quay Centre (235 Queens Quay West). $140, one day only $50, except May 15 free with Science Centre admission ($18, stu/srs $10), May 16 $30. 416-216-2160, **www.dx.org/digifest**

Steve Mann keynote speaker at Digifest tonight (Thursday, May 13), 6 pm, at the Design Exchange. $50.

Steve Mann, the world's first cyborg, has been called a lot of things: nerd, weirdo, performance artist, mad scientist. But really he's just a proud father. As we wander around the Design Exchange talking about his newly installed exhibition, he excitedly shares a picture of his daughter taking her first steps.

He's preserved this moment not because he waited agog with a video camera, but because he watched the whole event, like the rest of his life, through the filter of his WearComp system, a wearable computer 30 years in the making that has become an integral part of Mann's physiology.

Over one or both of his eyes, Mann wears a rotating fleet of mini-cameras and lasers that constantly mediate the world around him. Through the computing power attached to his body he can filter out obnoxious billboards, see people behind him, surf the Web and even change the colour of his surroundings.

This is all recorded off-site in a cyborg log (a "glog") available for later perusal for interesting tidbits like baby photos.

The apparatus has evolved since his days tinkering at MIT, but Mann continues to advocate for the subversive and empowering aspects of technology, whether he's teaching his course on wearable

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computers at U of T or putting up a power-generating windmill on the roof of his studio.

He calls his constant recording "sousveillance" (as opposed to surveillance), and tells me that we place too much trust in governments and corporations to run our technological systems.

"We [cyborgs] try to bring the cameras down to eye level, away from a God's-eye view," he says. "Surveillance is very corrosive to a community. We seem to trust authority and be afraid of strangers. I want to reverse that."

John Sobol, co-director for Digifest 2004, explains why they chose Mann to kick off this year's festival.

"When it comes to combining technology and mobility, there's nobody in Canada like Steve. He's very underrated as an artist – I think he's downplayed as an artist because of the science involved, and downplayed as a scientist because his stuff is so wacky."

In his book, Cyborg, Mann offers his own observations on the public's reaction to his get-up, which ranged from ridicule and revulsion in the early 80s to a more curious response today. But those in a position of power usually do not share the public's cautious enthusiasm. He was even physically assaulted at the AGO over fears that he was taking illegal pictures.

"Is violence the correct response to the possibility of copyright infringement?" he asks.

This discussion is brought into sharp focus as we wander past one of Mann's installations.

"You just stole some songs," he says as I walk over a projected map of the world.

"Every time you step on a continent, it downloads an MP3 from that part of the world and plays it," he explains. "These technologies are making geography irrelevant."

Check out www.wearcomp.org for more on Mann.

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ALSO BY JOSEPH WILSON:
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