Surveillance, a watchword for our times

Call it art, fun or just something to discourage shoplifters, but cameras are everywhere nowadays.

By Hugh Hart, Special to The Times
January 13, 2008

MEET the friendly new face of surveillance culture.

It's called FaceFinder, and since launching this summer, the smart sculpture resembling a gargantuan alarm clock has functioned like a high-tech photo booth in a courtyard off Sunset and Vine. Sheathed in aluminum and fronted by a glass-shelled video monitor screen, FaceFinder scans its target area outside Borders Bookstore, fixes upon a subject, captures his or her image with a camera concealed in its blob-like "ear," then magnifies every facial twitch at about six times normal size on a 5-foot video screen.

Meanwhile, a robotic projector culls images from the FaceTime database and sends 14-foot head shots of previous visitors to a nearby "wall of fame."

"People go up to the FaceFinder, play with it, or mock it, see if they can trick it," says creator Steve Appleton. "This whole dialogue occurs and the payoff is, there's this possibility that your face will join up with others projected on the wall."

Appleton is among a new breed of tech-savvy artists using motion sensors, 3-D cameras, robots and pattern-recognition software to put their own spin on a central fact of contemporary life: More and more, we are being watched. Security cameras capture the action at traffic intersections and border crossings -- and in malls, dressing rooms, airports, parking garages, hotel lobbies, museums. Cellphone cameras, Google Earth satellites and camcorders empower citizens to zoom in on celebrities and neighbors alike. Drones fly over Houston searching for "suspicious behavior."

Ingenious and pervasive, the monitoring of personal behavior in public spaces has given rise to an "art of surveillance" forged from tangled impulses encompassing interests in privacy, safety, exhibitionism, paranoia and good clean fun.

"I view these surveillance technologies as something I can use for aesthetic and dance-able purposes," says Appleton, a self-taught software wizard who wrote the code for his overall Face-Time system with Cal Arts-based programmer Steven Schkolne. "The kind of face detection we use was not possible at any level -- academically, NASA, anybody -- seven years ago. As artists we are now able to leverage this kind of technology. Since there ain't no getting away from it, let's take control."

While tourists mug for FaceFinder, commuters whizzing down Lankershim Boulevard in the Valley may or may not notice the blur of numerals flashing across the facade of NoHo Commons. Across the street from North Hollywood's Chandler Street subway station, "Drive By," completed in June by Los Angles duo Electroland, tracks each passing car with a violet-colored numeral that increases in value as the vehicle moves past the building. Electroland partner Cameron McNall says, "Our intention is really about, 'How can this building acknowledge that you're going by? And how can you know that the building is acknowledging you?'"

In the spotlight

TWENTY-FIVE miles south in downtown San Pedro, residents can't miss Christian Moeller's "Mojo" robot. Perched on a cheerful red-striped pole in front of Centre Street Lofts, the sculpture, which went "live" in November, swirls, rotates and bends, shining...
a spotlight on random pedestrians who catch the attention of video cameras mounted on roofs. The cameras transmit data to a computer program that instructs Mojo to follow each selected subject down the street.

Reactions vary, Moeller says. "It produces what I call 'the friendly surprise,' but also, people are scratching their heads going, 'What is that?' The movement of the thing is so precise . . . Mojo has a predator kind of quality that creates a certain insecurity."

Moeller, a German-born ex-architect who moved west in 2001 to teach at UCLA's Department of Design/Media Arts, also created Daisy, a propeller-topped motion-sensor at Singapore Changi International Airport that pivots "like a mime" to interact with travelers. In Tokyo, his "Nosy" cameras blow up black-and-white video of passersby onto a 43-foot-tall bit-mapped wall of the Art Village Osaka office building.

"I came to these works in an innocent way simply because I wanted to use the sensor technology," says Moeller. "But in these political times, the acceptance of what you might call the transparent citizen has become stunningly high." Ultimately, however, Moeller aims to delight, not instruct. "I'm most excited by that moment when somebody responds to my work and says, 'Oh, look at how smart, how nasty, how tricky this is.' "

Like Mojo, ACCESS Spotlight System follows people with a robotically operated beam of light. Created by Los Angeles-based artist Marie Sester to explore "the edges between scary and playful," the people-tracking museum installation, touring internationally since 2001, intrigues San Francisco MoMA curator Rudolf Frieling.

"A straightforward critique of institutional surveillance practices is not enough anymore," says Frieling, who plans a 2008 exhibition including surveillance-themed work, tentatively titled "Toward Participation in Art." Compared to the closed-circuit video experiments popular in the 1970s, media artists today operate in a more complicated societal context, he says.

"The historical framework, from Orwell's 1984 to YouTube 2007, represents a major shift in our culture. Artists like Marie Sester cleverly address this ambiguous ground, where the public response has changed from 'Big Brother is taking over' to the sense now that it's OK, it's part of my security."

Some artists question the cost of that security. After Hasan Elah mistakenly wound up on the FBI's terrorist watch list in 2002, the Bangladeshi-born Rutgers professor created Tracking Transience.net, an impudent exercise in self-surveillance in which he documents his own whereabouts via 20,000 time-stamped digital photos. Canadian artist Steve Mann and his cohorts dress themselves in camcorder-embedded T-shirts, bustiers and backpacks, then parade through stores to challenge the assumption that security cameras need only point in one direction -- at the customers.

By contrast, performance artist Jill Miller chose to play the heavy for her recent "Collectors" show at San Francisco's 2nd Floor Projects gallery. After training with a private investigator, she spent six months secretly photographing five Bay Area art collectors as they went about their daily business. The exhibition includes FBI-style flow charts diagramming each collector's "Residence," "Family and Friends" and "Activities." Miller also published "Them" a tabloid parody crammed with photographs of her unwitting subjects. "I started this project just wanting to observe the anthropological side of things," she says, "but when I looked over all these shots I realized, I'm really just making another OK! magazine. There's this sense of privacy we want to protect, yet at the same time, how many of those celebrity magazines are out there? To me that's an interesting contradiction."

Miller adds that "Collectors" was "meant to provoke," but as it turned out, none of her subjects complained. In fact, one collector purchased a flip book featuring pictures Miller had taken of his home.

While surveillance-themed artistic activity has surged in the United States since 9/11, European creative types have been crafting works in this vein since the '80s. Current practitioners include architect/designer Jason Bruges. Early in 2007 he rigged London Bridge with motion sensors that transmitted signals from pedestrians' mobile phones to generate a continuously mutating matrix of colored lights on the nearby Tower Bridge.

Speaking from London, the world's most heavily surveilled city, Bruges says, "Real-time tracking and information gathering will only get more sophisticated. I think it's very important to subvert these technologies and use them in a playful way so people become less scared and more comfortable with this technology that already surrounds them."

But how comfortable should citizens feel in the face of increasingly punctilious tracking systems? Thomas Y. Levin, author of "CTRL [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother" (MIT Press) and curator of Princeton University's 2001 exhibition "Anxious Omniscience: Surveillance and Contemporary Cultural Practice,"
notes, "You have to ask yourself when you're looking at this art: What kind of intervention is it making? Is it teaching people something they don't know? Is this stuff making people sensitive to a dimension of the surveillance economy that they might not have been aware of? Does the work empower us to take up different positions or ask new questions?"

At a minimum, the new surveillance art alerts citizens to the dense electronic soup that permeates 21st century urban environments. Electroland's McNall muses, "We're all so affected by this pervasive invisible electronic network. If you think seriously about all these technologies you could begin to get a little paranoid, but if you sort of cloak these things in friendly clothes, people aren't offended. We're interested in exploring fun ways to make these technologies visible and look at how this pervasiveness can change people's relationships to buildings and spaces, or to each other."