

Philosophers, futurists and artists will meet to explore the realities of bioterrorism. Steve Mann, inventor of wearable computers, talks to **REBECCA CALDWELL** about DECONference

Anthrax anxiety

TORONTO

Decontamination prior to entry. Complimentary attire provided. Bring no valuables," reads the fine print of the otherwise innocuous-looking invitation. No, it's not a meeting of Obsessive-Compulsives Anonymous, or even kinky sci-fi swingers. It is a call for pre-invited attendees to DECONference, a laboratory performance event designed to explore the realities of the world in the age of anthrax threats being held tonight in Toronto.

Part art installation, part educational seminar, part performance art, the origins of the DECONference lie with Steve Mann of the University of Toronto's Humanistic Intelligence Lab. Mann is also the poster boy (or is that pixel boy?) for the device called WearComp: He's credited with having invented wearable computers and is almost never seen without the gear that allows him to surf Web continuously.

But Mann also happens to be an activist and artist.

His well-known guerrilla work, celebrated in Peter Lynch's 2001 documentary *Cyberman* and Mann's book *Cyborg: Digital Destiny and Human Possibility in the Age of the Wearable Computer* (co-authored with Hal Niedzviecki, Random House, 2001) includes Michael Moore-ish assaults on places with surveillance cameras in force.

The irony lies when the inevitable security personnel ask him to stop filming the cameras filming him.

"A lot of what I do is a satire of the future," he says.

Sometimes his satire is uncomfortably close to reality. With DECONference, Mann isn't just cashing in on post-Sept. 11 hysteria. In fact, DECONference has its roots in Mann's working art installation called *Anthrax Ready Mailroom* that was displayed in July, 2001, as part of his exhibit *Prior Art: Art of Record for Personal Safety*. In what must be a feat of prescience, Mann says he's been interested since the 1990s in the widespread anxiety of the possibility of anthrax being sent through the mail.

It actually gives him a chance to explore his personal cause célèbre: illegal, unethical or simply unwanted surveillance of human activity.

For Mann, a natural offshoot is the potential abuse of civil liberties and privacy as a result of chemical-contamination scares. He points to the 1999 forcible decontamination measure in Earlimart, Calif., after pesticides were accidentally sprayed into the air. Residents of the farming community were herded, at least partially stripped naked and washed down in public by government emergency-response teams.

While the intentions of the emergency response team was to ensure

the health and safety of the public, many of those decontaminated still report the effects of traumatization and the humiliation they experienced.

It's this dehumanization in the name of public safety that both fascinates and concerns Mann. A board member at the Marshall McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, Mann discussed an expanded version of *Anthrax Ready Mailroom*.

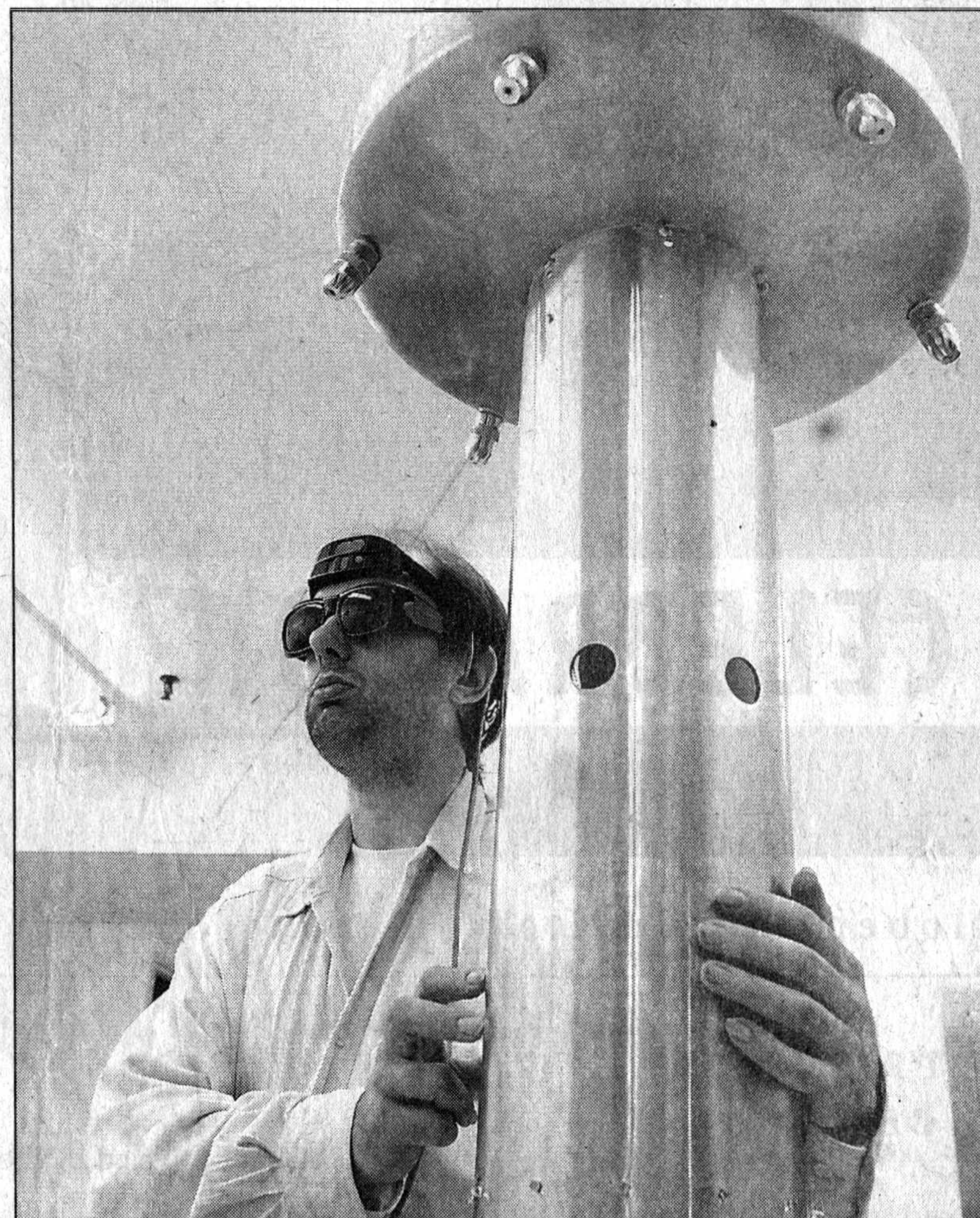
An idea hatched: Why not gather some of the nation's top philosophers, futurists and artists and invite the attendees to experience and then discuss the naked truth about the effects of decontamination?

The event falls squarely within the MuLuhan Program's mandate of continuing Marshall McLuhan's work, explains Mark Federman, the chief strategist at the McLuhan.

"Marshall was not only looking at mass media, but more at our relationship with the things we conceive or create that change us in some way," he said.

While anthrax is something that is naturally occurring, Federman points out that turning it into a weapon of potential terror is a human construct.

"Looking at issues in managing decontamination is something that causes ripples of change in us, the way we react to one another and



TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Mann with an installation for DECONference: 'The idea of this exhibit is that people don't know what takes place until they experience it.'

the way we react to society and authority," Federman says.

So how exactly will DECONference unfold — will the medium be the message? Is it as simple as dusting attendees with icing sugar and then hosing them down?

Like a computer-game addict who knows the secret keys to push to advance to higher levels and won't tell you, Mann is coy about what precisely is going to transpire at the event.

The secrecy of the evening's

events is necessary, argues Mann, in order to ensure the same sense of urgency at the sudden discovery of a suspicious substance or package in a building.

"The exact goings-on are confidential," Mann says. "The idea of this exhibit is that people don't know what takes place until they experience it."

What is known is that featured guests and speakers include Derrick de Kerckhove, the director of the McLuhan Program; Arthur

Kroker, the media futurist who has co-authored several books on virtual reality with his wife Marilouise; the Critical Art Ensemble, a multimedia, cultural-theory based art collective; and Web/performance artist Julia Scher.

Still, when pressed about the "complimentary attire," organizers admit that the 200 registered participants will enter the building across the street from the staid Art Gallery of Ontario and be asked to participate in a simulated anthrax scare.

"We haven't had as many scares in Canada as in the U.S., but it is a distinct possibility and certainly all of our various law-enforcement and ancillary services are preparing for it," Federman says. "The problem is the public is not preparing for it."

But the point of the evening isn't just a worst-case scenario safety drill. Even in a voluntary, safe re-enactment such as the one they have planned, the act of stripping down in front of strangers and being "decontaminated," raises all sorts of issues about personal freedoms.

Most of the evening's discussions will evolve around the right to dignity, and explore how this communal activity can have a dehumanizing effect. DECONference's organizers hope to publish a book based on the experiences of those with the guts to go through with it.

"I want people to think about what [the government's] response to terrorism means and whether or not we want a war on terrorism if our lives have to be lived in fear and hysteria," says Mann.

"We, as the individual people seem to be caught between two equal and opposite and rather unpleasant forces. Namely the force of the terrorists, and the force of the response to terrorism. Both are potentially evil and opposite forces. We are the victims of the war on terror as well as the terrorists."