

Questioning: a reflection on the Demonstrate project
www.Demonstrate.berkeley.edu

by Jane McGonigal, 1.31.05

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*Demonstrate is a project of the Alpha Lab for Industrial Engineering and Operations Research at
the University of California @ Berkeley*



What's going on there?
Questioning.

The Demonstrate team launched our robotic Webcam installation with a diverse set of guiding questions about surveillance, collaboration, visual free speech, site-specific art, and public access to technology. How much privacy should one expect and protect in public spaces? What are the political implications and cultural consequences of granting public access to surveillance technologies? How does the shared history of a site impact the ways different communities see and use it today? Is Internet photography a form of free speech that deserves protection?

As it turned out, we were not the only one with questions. During the course of the six-week installation, Demonstrate users raised their *own* set of questions — about the project, about the camera, about fellow users, and more than anything else, about the people, sites and objects they discovered through the Demonstrate lens.

Between September 1 and October 15, 2004, the Demonstrate community recorded and captioned over 1200 images of the everyday life and nightlife of Sproul Plaza. These images were saved in a public database that enabled registered members to comment on specific photos. Demonstrate users populated this database with thousands more comments discussing, debating and interrogating the captured images. A startling number of their captions and comments took the form of questions.

Questions are a particularly expressive medium: they define goals, reveal perspective, raise challenges, and invite engagement. Below is a selection of questions posted by online participants in the Demonstrate project, taken in order and verbatim from the Demonstrate archive. These “found questions” are intended to evoke the sense of playful inquiry, practical curiosity, political engagement, sense of audience, and self-reflexivity that developed within the Demonstrate online community. Their unfolding over time captures the shifting dynamics that emerged among users, and between the watchers and the watched.

The original photos and comments associated with each question below can be searched for here: <http://demonstrate.berkeley.edu/archive.php>. Questions that originally appeared in photo captions are followed by their Photo ID in brackets. Questions that originally appeared in the comments section of the photo archive are followed by their Photo ID and a letter to indicate where in the chain of commentary the question can be found.

Why is this cart always here? [53]
Who’s watching the watcher? [82a]
Did anyone see who put the foam in? [115a]
Can I take pictures today? [121]

Does anyone see a horse? [127a]
Drumset? Performance art? [148]
How about someone puts hidden spare change around and we watch them find it? [192a]
Praying and being bored are not mutually exclusive, are they? [202h]
Help! How do I get out? [219c]
Does anyone know what the name of this fountain is? [228d]

Would the same comments be made of a white or Asian kid hanging out on the steps with his hood pulled up? [229b]
Why is no one else singing? [230a]
Nobody home? [233]

Why are you always here? [248]
What do you think God is angry about? [250d]
What is this? [299]

Can I influence my own influence? [343a]
Can I stand on a pole in that hole? [414i]
Will your next self-portrait be more revealing? [447]
Is she taking a picture of us? [456a]
Who will win? [474]

What are these people doing so late at night? Are they conspiring? [519]
what else could explain this weird reflection? [528]
person sleeping or something else? [541]
what is this? [558]
Who is following whom? [586a]

Does anyone know why we can't zoom all the way in anymore? [590a]

Wow. How on earth did you manage that? [600a]
Do you identify with your captors? [620a]
Who's in charge of keeping this thing clean, Lucy Ricardo? [644a]
Is it just me or does the guy look completely submerged??? [668b]
Why do people jump in the fountain? [668]

Do these images have a voice too? [672a]

What are you waiting for? [678]
They look like they are dead! What are they doing? [696]
What's going on in there? [710]
Where are my two daughters??? [724]
I wonder what's troubling him? [731a]
Is that a rooster on the steps? [794a]
What were they complaining about? [801a]

Where are the people? [831]
"Why isn't there anything interesting here?" [870a]
What's he doing here? [906]
Is That All There Is? [913]
Is he sleeping or dead? [946a]

Where is the camera located? [950a]
At what time exactly are the demonstrations? [968]
Who is on this committee? When and where do we learn of the findings? [994a]

Hey, what's this we just stumbled across? [989]
Can you tell what time it is by the shadows?? [1013]
What are they building? [1043]
Speak or yell? [1044a]

Is there more than one camera? [1055a]
how many? [1067]

What has become of our country? [1090]
HOWARD DEAN WAS HERE? [1117]
Social circles... are you in? [1167]

what are they doing? [1171a]

What's going on there? [1228]
Questioning. [1246]