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Toward a Practice of Observation

On Incorporated Observation in Jordan Crandall's Work

Anne Zeitz

“I had left my house to relax from some tedious piece of work by walking and by a consequent change of scene. As I went along the street where I live, I was suddenly *gripped* by a rhythm which took possession of me and soon gave me the impression of some force outside myself. It was as though someone else were making use of my *living-machine*. Then another rhythm overtook and combined with the first, and certain strange *transverse* relations were set up between these two principles [...]. They combined the movement of my walking legs and some kind of song I was murmuring, or rather which was being murmured *through me*.”

Paul Valéry¹

“The textures of the environment – its signs, sensations, inclinations – mingle with expectations, and its capacities strive to oblige me to *follow my path*.”

Jordan Crandall²

Introduction

- ¹ Since the mid 1990s, American artist Jordan Crandall's writings, installations and performances have been questioning the influence of new technologies on perception and on the human body. From 1991 to 1996, Crandall directed the editorial project *Blast*. Taking the form of boxes devoid of any information on their content, this series of “magazines” featured various objects, as well as editable and transmutable texts. In 1997, he created multimedia installation *Suspension* as part of *Dokumenta X* in Kassel.

which focused on the way spectators transformed the actual and virtual data provided by the artist. In the late 1990s to early 2000s, Crandall worked on the strategic vision and issues of military technology. This research work resulted in his video installations *Drive*, *Heatseeking* and *Trigger*. His recent works—namely the text *Something Is Happening* (2010), the research project comprised of various writings and a performance entitled *Gatherings* (2011), and the text *An Actor of the Street, Events, Agencies, and Gatherings* (2011)—all demonstrate his interest in the interactions between individuals and their augmented environment, especially in urban crowds.

- 2 In his works, especially the ones related to *Suspension* and *Gatherings*, Crandall researches the ways one can represent and describe the influences and dynamic exchanges occurring in an area characterized by the presence of surveillance, reconnaissance and detection technologies. Since the early 1990s, the artist has been interested in the interdependence between people and data, the latter having crept into each and every area of our daily life. Crandall points out the extent to which this interdependence affects our perception. Based on Crandall's work, I propose to develop the idea of a perceptual state developed in response to the manipulation and standardization established by surveillance technologies. This perception cannot be achieved by avoiding, opposing or ignoring these mechanisms, but on the contrary through a complex interaction between the latter and the observer. Taking Crandall's artistic propositions as a starting point, I will introduce some positions and theories paving the way to a reflection on the hybrid environments in which we are living. In this perspective, I will emphasize the theories of observation, sousveillance, assemblage and incorporation, which allow us to consider an alternative to the deterministic and technophobic thinking, with regards to the environments and technologies surrounding us.

On the observer

- 3 Created by Jordan Crandall in 1997, multimedia installation *Suspension* is founded on four conceptual principles: “*Matrix* concerns the structure of signification, its indissoluble links to material substrate, and its figuration of recurrences; *vehicle* concerns body, signification, and technological apparatus as constituted in motion, including the ways that this apparatus converts, transports, and makes its users adequate to new velocities; *phoropticality* concerns the augmentation of vision by technological apparatus, its manufactured mistrust of the naked eye, and its role in converting the body; and *pacing* regards navigational modes that are adequate to the traversal of these conversational environments, and which organize space according to patterns, rhythms, and routines.”³ Crandall implements these structuring principles of *Suspension* by projecting light onto small mirrors and screening videos, part of which are pre-recorded, the rest being live projections. The *vehicle* principle takes the form of small objects standing on a shelf and designed to be taken in one's hand. They are prosthetic colored and numbered objects made of fiberglass, a few centimeters wide. The installation also features a book containing “figures,” images and various diagrams, as well as a website. The latter was created using VRML, a language designed to describe 3D virtual worlds and developed in 1994. At the time, VRML (*Virtual Reality Markup Language*) allowed Crandall to create an interactive universe that would change depending on the person using the installation computer. Crandall emphasizes the fact

that there is a mutual influence between the four principles of *Suspension* and the person crossing the room.

Fig. 1, 2

Jordan Crandall, *Suspension*, 1997.

© Jordan Crandall

- 4 His latest project *Gatherings* represents the outcome of several years of research, which takes the form of texts and a reading/performance. A play in three acts lasting 60 minutes, it was presented for the first time at Berlin's Transmediale in February 2011 and won the *Vilém Flusser Theory Award*. This play "blends performance art, political theater, philosophical speculation, and intimate reverie."⁴ During the reading/performance, Crandall stands on the stage, in a spotlight and in front of a triple video projection. He reads a text and moves from a seat in the middle of the stage, to another seat on the left side of the stage, to a podium on the right side, always followed by the spotlight. Here, Crandall questions the relation between the individual and the crowd, as well as the highly informational environment in which this confrontation takes place. Through this project, Crandall strives to implement the observer as an individual, while taking into account the multiple influences, both human and technological, that block and push them.
- 5 Crandall is interested in the observer's perceptual issues, which depend on a lot of factors. The notion of observation arising from *Suspension* and *Gatherings* refers to the one theorized by Jonathan Crary. Crary refers to the first definition of the term *to observe*, which, according to *Le Grand Robert de la langue française*⁵, firstly means "to follow exactly, to the letter, to regularly comply with (a law, rule, obligation)..." Since 1535, the term takes on the meaning of an act of perception: "To look intently, in order to learn, to study" and "to examine, to watch (someone) carefully." In *Techniques of the Observer*⁶, Jonathan Crary opposes the notions of observer and spectator, noting that while few dictionaries make a distinction between those two words, there is a significant difference in their etymological resonance. *Spectare* refers exclusively to the act of looking at something and has a passive connotation in the context of nineteenth-century culture. On the other hand, *Observare* implies the observer's action. Crary emphasizes the first meaning of the term, according to which observation means conforming one's action to rules, codes and practices. He states that "though obviously

one who sees, an observer is more importantly one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations.”⁷ These complex conditions of observation are both physiological and psychological, but also discursive, social, technological and institutional. However, observation as a perceptive act and observation as an adaptation go hand in hand. The observer is now the one who perceives within a complex system of limitations and incitements, to which they adapt—the observer and the system in which the observation takes place influencing each other.

- 6 In *Suspension* and *Gatherings*, Crandall analyzes how the observer develops in relation to various technologies surrounding them. In his writings related to *Suspension*, he describes dynamic spaces in this way: “They are accessed, ordered, and navigated under the conditions of various online and offline protocols”⁸. By adopting this approach, he insists on the interdependence between the observer and their environment. According to Crandall, this environment is increasingly characterized by the development of digital technologies, which strongly affect the observer’s perception and body.

Fig. 3, 4, 5

Jordan Crandall, *Suspension*, 1997. Series of *vehicles* placed on a shelf in the installation.

© Jordan Crandall

On sousveillance

- 7 Talking about the principle of *vehicle* in his installation *Suspension*, Crandall directly refers to the marketing strategies implemented with a view to link the consumer’s body with commercial products. The *vehicle* in the mid 1990s installation, a hand-held device helping the observer, prefigures the emergence of devices such as cellphones, GPS and smart objects, and indicates the closeness of technology to the body, now become a “cyborg”. In *Gatherings*, Crandall also questions the processes arising from the Internet, as well as the digital processes as a whole. In this project, Crandall defines the surveillance and detection mechanisms characterizing today’s society. In this performance/reading, he describes the functioning of credit cards, RFID chips and GPS, which influence the observer’s movements and perception.

Fig. 6, 7, 8

Jordan Crandall, *Gatherings*, 2011. Images taken from the performance/reading projection.

© Jordan Crandall

- 8 In his performance and text *An Actor of the Street, Events, Agencies, and Gatherings*, written in 2011, Crandall highlights the movements of a man in an urban area pervaded by tracking technologies. The descriptions of the man's movements in the city alternate with the descriptions of its surveillance networks. The typical contemporary surveillance elements follow the individual across the city. These technologies are part of the processes of capture, analysis and calculation of data on the user's movements and behaviors. Here, Crandall emphasizes processes similar to those of *sousveillance*, as defined by Dominique Quessada. Quessada notes that, while the term *surveillance* principally refers to the sense of sight (*veiller* meaning keeping one's eyes open), *sousveillance* cannot be limited to "vision." Quessada aims way beyond visual surveillance: "Heterogeneous by nature, contemporary surveillance develops from the interconnection of digital technologies, geolocation, video surveillance, databases, biometry, interception of communications and worldwide horizontalization of all of these aspects."¹⁰
- 9 This is how Crandall explains his interest in tracking mechanisms, which rely on algorithmic procedures and automated systems: "I explore how technologies of tracking have been incorporated into distributed network environments—augmented by new sensing and locationing technologies and embedded into mobile devices, buildings, cars, and urban infrastructures."¹¹ However, *Gatherings* cannot be reduced to the implementation of processes to adapt to the technologies determining insidious *sousveillance*. On the contrary, Crandall focuses on the possibilities a subject confronted with a complex network of sur- and *sousveillance* is provided with. According to Crandall, analyzing the networks of powers surrounding us is crucial, while simultaneously focusing on the subject taking action within those networks.

Fig. 9

Jordan Crandall, *Suspension*, « plan », 1997.

© Jordan Crandall

The individual and the crowd

- 10 In order to picture the link between the sur- and sousveillance processes and the individual, Crandall updates in *Gatherings*, as well as in *An Actor of the Street*, the figure of “The man of the crowd” described by Edgar Allan Poe. In Poe’s short story, this figure of *The Man of the Crowd*¹² is associated with the changing 20th-century urban landscape. In this 1840 short story, a man is sitting in a coffee-house, peering into the street beyond the window. After a while, an old man in the crowd catches the eye of the observer. As the observer feels the urge to know more about him, he decides to follow him. However, he fails to learn anything about this enigmatic character, even after he tailed the wandering man, endlessly roaming the streets this night and the next morning.
- 11 In the cultural context of the 20th and 21st centuries, *Gatherings* describes and substantiates the interaction between the individual and the urban crowd, between the individual and the everflowing environment that pursues and “captures” them. In this way, he transposes onto contemporary society the curiosity felt by Poe’s character in the coffee-house and during his “chase.” Like Poe’s short story, *Gatherings* starts with a man observing the crowd passing by him. Nevertheless, Crandall complements this observation with a security officer watching this street scene, as well as an automated video system targeting this same character. The observer leaves his observation post and follows the wandering man, just like Poe’s character. Crandall draws a link between

detection technologies and the observation modes physically and psychologically involving the observer in the observed scene.

Fig. 10, 11

Jordan Crandall, *Gatherings*, 2011. Recording of the performance/reading during Berlin's Transmediale in 2011.

© Transmediale

- 12 According to Crandall, two opposite aspects of detection technologies focus on the tracked man. Some video-analysis programs allow for the recognition and visualization of activities standing out from the crowd, such as a person who would stay at the same spot for too long. While this application aims to prevent any deviant behavior, it also allows for the identification of potential consumers. As a matter of fact, some billboards keep track of the passersby's stare, in order to assess their reactions. While their objectives are contradictory, the aim in these two examples is to stop the passerby, whether they are a consumer who must be spotted, or a criminal who must be arrested. Despite this double aim, one is not dominated by analysis and detection technologies. Although one may be affected by these technologies, one affects them in one's turn. For Crandall, the subject develops in relation to and within various interconnected arrangements. *Gatherings* describes this mutual influence as follows: "The actor may be a 'center', but like every other actor, he is an aggregate of the material world. In this sense, he does not only receive movements, he gives some in return."¹³
- 13 According to Crandall, the way urban "actors" respond to detection mechanisms influence them. Subsequently, the interaction that takes place results in an endless transformation of both the observer and their environment. As described by Deborah Hauptmann¹⁴, Crandall confronts us with augmented environments "within which both human and machinic agency interact, interoperate, inter-immense."¹⁵ In order to account for the dynamic that links the observer to their environment, the structure of *Gatherings* derives from the "assemblage theory"¹⁶ formulated by American philosopher Manuel DeLanda's¹⁷. The assemblage theory developed by DeLanda in *A New Philosophy of Society, Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*¹⁸ originates from the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. For DeLanda, Deleuze's notion of *agencement* indicates first and foremost the relation between a part and a whole within a complex network. The assemblage theory thus represents a starting point for the study of complex social facts, while focusing on individuals. In *A New Philosophy of Society*, DeLanda explains and develops the assemblage theory. According to his minimal definition, assemblage is an ensemble made up of irreducible and heterogeneous elements that can be broken down. It is irreducible in the sense that it develops "emerging properties," or in other words that the properties are not solely defined by the sum of the properties of the involved elements. Besides, it can be broken down, since the elements do not merge within the assemblage, but can be reintroduced in new assemblages. According to

DeLanda, the approach adopted by the assemblage theory allows for a concrete analysis of social realities at various levels. In *Gatherings*, Crandall tries to apply DeLanda's theories to the observation mechanisms. He is interested in the way the individual moves depending on the infrastructure surrounding them, but also depending on the other "actors" of the urban environment. The observer's practice cannot be separated from their environment, yet it can be analyzed within the relations involving them. This practice constitutes an action, according to Crandall, and "action is a modulation"¹⁹ implemented in dynamic situations.

"Incorporated" observations

- 14 For Crandall, the observer is indeed the target of the tracking technology, but at the same time, they escape this technology, for they are always moving and changing, thus suspending the operation of the sousveillance society: "His movements are characterized by discontinuations and interruption: they are performed at different paces, in various directions and on different scales."²⁰ This idea of motion as an act of resistance is very much influenced by the theory of walking developed by Michel de Certeau, but also by the way Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi perceives the relation between the body and the media and technologies surrounding it. In *Parables for the Virtual, Movement, Affect, Sensation*²¹, Massumi focuses on the body's movement and sensuality. In the introduction to his work, he remarks: "Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other?"²²
- 15 Crandall shares this view of the observer's body, whose interrelated potential movements and perceptions must be taken into account. For Massumi, the notion of motion is related to the idea of a body in constant mutation: "When a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation."²³ Consequently, Massumi develops a theory considering the human body as caught in immediate relations and potentially undergoing variations and transformations. However, by nature, this body is also a body that "feels." By adopting this approach, Massumi paves the way for an analysis of daily acts of resistance manifesting themselves through perceptual modes and physical and physiological sensations.
- 16 While Crandall refers several times to the image of the crossing or walking in order to visualize the act of observing, he defines this action as an "embodied practice." This practice depends on the interaction between the observer and their environment. David Howes analyzes *embodiment* in relation with perception and distinguishes this notion from that of *emplacement*, which according to him, makes the former more complex: "While the *embodiment* paradigm implies an integration of the mind and body, the paradigm resulting from *emplacement* suggests a reciprocal and sensual relation between body-mind-environment"²⁴, in which *environment* is considered both in the physical and social sense of the word. For Howes, *emplacement* refers to a rich perception of oneself in relation with the environment and is thus opposite to a feeling of *displacement*. Crandall's *embodied* practice must be understood in this sense, which structures the observer within a complex and dynamic network and gives them a sense of belonging to this network.

Fig. 12, 13

Jordan Crandall, diagrammes, *Gatherings*, 2011.

© Jordan Crandall

- 17 Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter²⁵ draw a distinction between the notion of *integration* and that of *embodiment*, gathered under the label of *incorporation*. They define integration as “the integration of human life forces into systems of social and technical organization beyond the human scale.”²⁶
- 18 *Embodiment* is a subtler process. It consists of “strategies through which human life combines with and assimilates the grids and rhythms of everchanging, minimal concrete historical contexts in which they occur.”²⁷ It is in this sense that the movements of man across the city are presented by Crandall as an *embodiment* action. According to Crary and Kwinter, *embodiment* is the practical relation the individual has with their environment and through which they “adapt” to and “retain” specific effects. For Jonathan Crary, the notion of *embodiment* allows for a dual notion of the body, which thus becomes both the subject of the operations of power and the subject of potential resistance.

The observation senses

- 19 In his recent projects, and especially in his text *Something Is Happening*, as well as in the texts and performance of *Gatherings*, Crandall puts emphasis on the sensual experiences of the observer. The observer that Crandall suggests immerses himself in the space and in the meandering crowd by using all of his senses. The observer’s practice manifests itself through sight, hearing, taste and smell. This sensual involvement which interests Crandall is particularly obvious in the text *Something Is Happening*. In this text, Crandall describes a summer street scene: the narrator’s attention is caught by a crowd gathered to watch something that he cannot see. “SOMETHING IS HAPPENING just around the corner. In the expanse of an ordinary summer afternoon, people have stopped on the sidewalk to stare. [...] The air is annotated with the pointing of fingers: Look over there!”²⁸
- 20 In Crandall’s writings, this “observation of observations” involves all the senses. “Absorbed in the gathering, I feel the sweat of the man next to me, his heartbeat, his anxious pleasure. I feel someone’s hot breath against my skin. a vibration passes through me, which could become a murmur”²⁹, one can read in *Something Is Happening*. In his introduction to *Empire of the Senses*, David Howes insists on this “intersensoriality,” “the multidirectional interaction of the senses and sensorial ideologies, whether they are regarded in relation with society, an individual or a work.”³⁰ As early as *Suspension*, Jordan Crandall has constantly highlighted the

importance of intersensoriality: “to focus on visual codes and miss them.”³¹ Touch, smell, hearing and sight, through their interdependence, all contribute to shaping observation experiences.

Fig. 14

Jordan Crandall, diagramme, *Gatherings*, 2011.

© Jordan Crandall

- 21 For Crandall, every observation contains the desire to be absorbed in the perception of the other. This act should not be mistaken for absorption as defined by Michael Fried, which relates to characters represented in a painting or a photograph, and not the spectator of the work. Through his idea of absorption, Crandall describes an observation escaping voyeuristic distance and separation. Crandall is interested in the immersion phenomena occurring in a crowd. He notices that the usual idea of visual perception as taking possession and control reveals but only one aspect of observation phenomena. Crandall sees observation as necessarily involving the observer both physically and mentally, “through sensations, rhythms and emotional commitment.”³² The narrator submits to his environment and what happens, the nature of which remains unknown to us. For Crandall, one always strives to both keep one’s independence and lose oneself, to give in to something. Every observation experience goes together with the pleasure of renunciation: “Perhaps it is a submissive experience of a certain scale, intensity, and rhythm that I seek, in order to lose myself and find myself again, extended, elsewhere.”³³

Conclusion

- 22 It is through this constantly vacillating perception that the observer establishes a link with the people and infrastructures surrounding him/her, while distinguishing him/herself from them. Crandall’s observer responds to the multiple influences of their environment through multi-sensorial perception, which simultaneously absorbs and

isolates them. For Crandall, every perception is thus linked to the notion of loss of oneself, going together with a feeling of enrichment.

- 23 The observation described by Jordan falls within a reflection initiated about twenty years ago by the artist on the transformations induced by digital technologies. In order to respond to the developments of surveillance, reconnaissance and tracking, it is crucial that new methods are found for the analysis of highly informational environments with which we are confronted today. Crandall's works pave the way for a new form of analysis of this complexity by taking as a starting point the subject as a subject of action. Crandall drops all deterministic vision, while showing the issues of the technologies affecting our movements and perceptions. In this way, his work manages to reveal the inherent creativity of our daily perceptual practices in front of a society pervaded by sur- and sousveillance technologies.

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ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on the new forms taken by the artistic and philosophical approach to hybrid environments in our contemporary society, more specifically in the *sousveillance* society. Through a presentation of American artist Jordan Crandall's multimedia work, we will pave the way to new methods for the analysis of these complex environments, which escape the deterministic and dysphoric perspectives. We will take some of Crandall's works and writings as a starting point, in order to introduce the *sousveillance* theory, as well the notions of observation, assemblage and incorporation. Based on these notions, we will rethink the relationship between the individual and environment - actual or virtual -, as well as the creativity that it induces.

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Keywords: assemblage, incorporation, observation, surveillance, sousveillance

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Anne Zeitz is associate professor at Rennes 2 University. Her research mainly focuses on surveillance and “sousveillance” theories, notions of attention and observations as well as descriptions and practices of counter-surveillance in contemporary art, literature and cinema. (Paris 8/2014). She organized the project Movement-observation-control for the Goethe Institute in Paris, collaborated with the Goethe Institute in Johannesburg and was a member of the Observatory of New Media. She is currently taking part in the research project “La Fabrique des arts sonores” and Urban Encounters/Tate Britain (2014-2015). She is associated with the research laboratory TEAMeD and she was postdoctoral student at the Labex Arts-H2H/Paris 8 in 2015/2016.