

## ***Observational Practices:***

### ***A Conversation with Jordan Crandall on Rhythm, Pace and Crowd Interaction***

**Anne Zeitz**

#### **Introduction**

In his book *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary distinguishes between the spectator as a passive onlooker and the observer as “one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations.”<sup>1</sup> The Latin root (*observare*) of the verb “to observe” reveals the observer to be extremely dependent on the social, historical, and institutional conditions. Observation is therefore part of a process of constant adaptation, a practice involving the body as a whole and not only the eyes.

From his first works of the early 1990s, Jordan Crandall has constantly addressed his work to observers rather than spectators. Following *Blast* (1991–96), an editorial project in which he invited the reader/observer to edit and contribute to various issues of a multimedia magazine published in box format, Crandall developed *Suspension* in 1997. This work confronted visitors with a number of protocols and regulations while asking them to find their own rhythm and pace within this framework. This articulation between participation and control is one of the key concepts of Crandall’s subsequent work. Indeed, for Crandall, we are constantly trying to find our own rhythm, a search that is made particularly difficult today because of the conditions of contemporary space with its complex networks and cycles.

Crandall’s recent writings and works, such as *Something is Happening* (2010) and *Gatherings* (2011), attest to his increasing interest in crowd interaction, and in articulating events as sites for dynamic and multilateral exchanges. In these projects, Crandall focuses on the processes of adaptation within groups of people who are subjected to the combined influence of a specific technical and infrastructural setting, and of surrounding bodies.

In Crandall's work common oppositions such as interior/exterior, passive/active, actor/audience lose their meaning. While emphasizing the impact of control technologies and devices on the body and on space, Crandall also highlights the subject/observer’s ability to adhere to, resist, or modulate given circumstances. In this sense Crandall’s works exclude passivity of any kind: observers are forced to reflect on their situation and the infinite possibilities that open up before them, and are compelled to act to this effect.

**Anne Zeitz:** For Documenta X in 1997, you presented *Suspension*,<sup>2</sup> an immersive space created by means of various video projections and a website. The title of the work indicates a special state of observation, the state of being suspended. In your installation this state seems to imply an interference as well as an interruption, an implication as well as a withdrawal.

Could you explain this particular state, and the interaction that takes place between the viewer and the installation?

**Jordan Crandall:** What I wanted to embody in *Suspension* is an “in-between” state of being, where one has to navigate between the conditions of mixed reality environments, all the while having to be attuned to the particular protocols of these environments—their standards, frequencies, conditions, and structuring principles. It is always a matter of being attuned to the

conditions of the environments in which one finds oneself, however they compete or cooperate. I wanted to find a way to focus on patterns, rhythms, and routines—the underlying rhythmic substrata, which are often ignored in favor of spatial representations. I focused on the act of “pacing.” I found it immensely fascinating, because when you begin to look at it, it is everywhere, everything participates in pacing. I understood pacing as a particular, repetitive bodily action, where you inhabit a rhythm, one that also helps to structure your environment. It is an agency, very much like walking is for Certeau,<sup>3</sup> through which the transformation of space becomes possible. Space becomes a practice, but this is not a space in opposition to advanced technology, but a space that becomes possible through an in-depth engagement of its conditions. As we know, we navigate a complex assemblage of spaces on a daily basis. We toggle between spaces, and have to adjust ourselves accordingly. We need a spatial literacy—a way of understanding the terms of the densely stratified spaces that we traverse daily. We interfere and interrupt, as you say, but we also correspond. We are implicated and we withdraw, but not in terms of binary opposites. We engage in degrees of divergence-assembly.

**AZ:** What is it you call a “vehicle,” and what role does it play in *Suspension*?

**JC:** In working with the concept of pacing, I became very interested in the site of the handheld device, because it seemed to become a potent locus of all manner of spatial and rhythmic operations, and one that, through increasing miniaturization, snuggles up to the body, becoming extremely intimate and personalized. It offers a gateway to new conveniences, allures, and attractions, allowing us access to spaces and situations that we could not otherwise be present in (or at least, not as quickly). This is the “vehicle.” Locus of advanced design, convenience, and sensory allure. It gives you the world, right in the palm of your hand. But hopefully it does not stop there: to the extent that we can regard it as a congealed locus of all manner of operations and agencies, protocols and paces, rhythms and regulations, we can work with it in the development of an informed, embodied spatial practice. The book that was part of the installation, also called *Suspension*, contained a collection of “figures,” or guides, for such a practice.

**AZ:** *Suspension* imposes a number of protocols on the audience, which creates a certain state of control. At the same time, you incite the person entering the installation to find his own rhythm and “pace” within these regulations, an act you call an “informed, embodied spatial practice.” You also propose guides to accomplish this exercise. The audience therefore hovers between a state of subordination to, and control over, the situation.

How did this articulation manifest itself during Documenta X, how did the audience react to your installation?

**JC:** This condition of “hovering between states”—states that might be understood in terms of subordination and control—is one that I wanted to articulate in terms of relational structures that are not based on a foundational condition of difference. Alphonso Lingis<sup>4</sup> writes that continual differentiation—the incessant unfolding of ever new, ever divergent appearances—is also continual assembling, assimilation, of all that appears. To see greater and lesser difference is also to see lesser and greater similarity. In the place of absolute oppositions or contradictions we have degrees—degrees of correspondence and divergence to what matters. Moving within the installation at Documenta X, I wanted visitors to sense this in a very palpable way, not just through concepts but through rhythmic infrastructures. The video projections that covered all of the walls of the installation space were point-of-view “walk-

throughs” of that very space, and visitors could connect with—attune to—the inhabiting agencies that walked through them. The correspondence and divergence happens, as always, in a variety of formats—here they primarily consisted of live and recorded analog video, animation, and VRML<sup>5</sup> (this was 1997!). It is a matter of what gains attention, what gets standardized. You can adhere to the standard, or you can resist, modulate. In the process, you coalesce and disperse, saturate and dilute, synchronize and dissonate. There is a pliability within the regulation, and this is what I hoped to foreground. The question is not so much who controls space, but how it gets standardized and operationalized through various agencies, and how one might gain access to those agencies, amplifying or diminishing their relevance.

**AZ:** Two years before *Suspension* you stopped publishing *Blast* (1991–96), a magazine containing diverse transmutable objects and texts in box format, a project you defined as “a system of editorial circulation.” *Blast* emphasized new modes of communication and participation in the context of publishing practices.

The way you conceive the topic of interaction in this project seems more “optimistic” than the way it is understood in *Suspension*. How do you see the development from *Blast* to *Suspension* with regard to the relationship between participation and control these projects propose and impose?

**JC:** *Blast* was certainly more utopian as concerns its interactive possibilities. But it’s difficult to compare the two projects. *Blast* took place over a much longer period of time and the entire production process was necessarily inclusive and transparent. I wanted to explore the mechanisms behind the production and reception of editorial content, and to find ways of including readers and distributors in the meaning-making process. Even booksellers had to participate by explaining what it is, because the boxes were completely unmarked! This was the time before the Internet came into widespread use. In a way, *Blast* was a deconstruction of the timespace of the print publication as it began to enter the age of the network. It was motivated by many of the issues of the time, not the least of which included questions of the nature of authorship. It was motivated by the question of how a text comes into existence—how it gets circulated, modified, controlled, endowed with meaning and relevance—and the possibilities of achieving agency within a system that had heretofore been understood as closed.

**AZ:** After *Suspension*, you started a series of writings and video projects concentrating on strategic seeing, on the way military technology influences vision and the body. *Drive (Track 3)*,<sup>6</sup> one of these video works, was installed in the exhibition *CTRL (SPACE)* at the ZKM in 2001 as a two-channel video projection. The spectator of this work is confronted with traditional cinematographic sequences as well as with military tracking and reconnaissance imagery.

In what way does *Drive* make one aware of the militarization of vision?

**JC:** To speak about the militarization of vision is also to speak about the militarization of the body, and this is one of the key themes in *Drive (Track 3)* especially. The actress is seen through surveillance and night vision technology; through aerial, satellite-like images; and through the abstracted frameworks of targeting systems. She is also seen in black and white film, shot with a traditional 16 mm film camera, in the style of Hollywood film noir. The night vision technology is of the kind used by the US military; it was developed during the

time of the Vietnam War, but it only became widely known during the first Gulf War. To shoot the video (in 1999), we used a special lens attachment that was developed by the manufacturer who supplied the US military. It was rather large and unwieldy and it made the video camera look like a kind of weapon. The actress is seen through these control technologies, as well as in the glamorized mode of Hollywood cinema, engaged in the repetitive routines of her daily life. But these ways of seeing connect to ways of being, and she begins to see in terms of the technologies that have been imposed upon her. We toggle between exterior and interior views, between objective and subjective realities, and the traces of this mixing are etched into the rhythmic patterns of her life. A strange kind of intimacy results, which does not settle easily into one kind of reading. What is the agency of the “control” that the actress exhibits? She is subject to the controlling gaze, yet she appropriates it, transforms it into an active sensory and fantasy life. It is a life of both violence and pleasure. She is trapped on the one hand, contained; yet on the other hand, she courts a synthetic engagement with the technologies that impose upon her. She modulates the limits.

**AZ:** The book *DRIVE* has a revealing table of contents.<sup>7</sup> You show the diagram of an amplifier inside which there are vignettes relating to the different chapters of the book. The book contains texts and images of the three works we have just spoken about (*Drive*, *Suspension*, *Blast*), as well as a number of your writings, an introduction by Peter Weibel, and a dialogue with Brian Holmes. The diagram of the amplifier appears throughout the book, and seems to structure it. Within this amplifier the projects are connected to each other in a specific manner. Can you describe this “amplification” in *Drive*, *Suspension*, *Blast*, your writings, and your dialogues?

**JC:** We wanted a metaphor for the way that the book itself could be seen to operate—a collection of inputs and outputs with a user interface that allows you to modulate flows of content, affect, rhythm. Since the material in the book includes diagrams, images, codes, sketches, documentation, we wanted to foreground my practice as a performative activity, and one that is not just concerned with conceptual meaning. In many ways the basis of my work is rhythm and sensing—what it means to *sense*, not just to “make sense.” There are strong affective and rhythmic undercurrents, and I try to incorporate them as organizing principles. In the organization of my books I want to emphasize the rhythmic infrastructures that come into play in the simplest acts, including the act of reading. The use of rhythm as a connecting force among components is something that I also used in the *Suspension* book and diagrammatic poster. My work is strongly visual, but in many ways I try to offset emphasis on the visual. I want to use representation only to lessen our reliance on it. The image is but a surface effect, a projection or stabilization of something deeper. It is energy, and what I want to understand is the movement, processing, and sharing of matter and energy—how it “gathers.” Its ontologies of assembly. Rhythm is in many ways a key to this. We modulate rhythm, amplify or diminish it, spin in and out of synch. There is a pleasure to be subordinated to it. When you engage rhythm on this level, much of our political concepts regarding power or control no longer apply.

**AZ:** Let’s now focus on your recent projects. *Something is Happening*,<sup>8</sup> an essay written in 2010, introduces the theme of crowd interaction into your work. The following extract reminded me of your description of the “happening event” in *Something is Happening*. It is a quotation from the novel *An Evening with Monsieur Teste* (1896) by Paul Valéry dealing with the state of suspension and of attentiveness in relation to the crowd:

He focused on a young man in front of us, then on a woman, then on a group of people in the upper galleries — who protruded from the balcony with burning faces — and then everyone, the whole theater, full to bursting, ardent, fascinated by the scene that we couldn't see. The idiocy of the other people revealed to us that something sublime was happening. We concentrated on all the figures in the theater. And when the light diminished, there was only the vast phosphorescence of those thousand figures left. I felt that it was this crepuscule that created such passive beings. Their attention and the growing obscurity formed a continual equilibrium. I myself was inevitably attentive—to all this attention . . .

“The light is holding them.”

“You too?”

“You too.”<sup>9</sup>

Could you describe your interest in crowd interaction, and your definition of the “happening event?”

**JC:** A very interesting quote! I didn't know it. I'm interested in the dynamics of the incipient event—the event that congeals at the fulcrum of our attention, but whose energies ripple outward, influencing relations between people and confusing boundaries between inside and outside. Where is the event, exactly? We can't draw its contours. And without those who channel it, gawk at it, point at it, we would not know it as such. And just what kind of knowingness does it compel? We “know” it corporeally, through sensation, rhythm, and affective engagement, just as much through linguistic concepts. We attune to it, in ways that we don't always understand—ways that, if we try to articulate, can seem contradictory. I am interested in the desire to be immersed in the event—as when we move toward something that is happening, as if drawn by some mysterious force—and how this absorptive desire might be understood as something quite fundamental. Usually we privilege voyeuristic separation and distance: we stand apart from a phenomenon in order to capture it, control it, possess it. Implicit in nearly every mode of analysis is the drive for mastery, often understood in visual terms. But what happens if we understand non-visual bodily absorption as more primary? There is the pleasure of relinquishment—of “giving in” to something, as when we are in love. It is at work in concepts of the sublime, which Valéry alludes to in his passage—for many thinkers (Bataille, for example), lurking within this phenomenon is our old friend: death.

**AZ:** You are currently working on the project *Gatherings*,<sup>10</sup> and you just won the Vilém Flusser Theory Award at the 2011 transmediale festival for the essay *Gatherings 1: Event, Agency, and Program*.<sup>11</sup> It seems to me that *Gatherings* combines your interest in the techniques of “tracking”—which you concentrated on in *Drive, Heatseeking* (2000),<sup>12</sup> and *Trigger* (2002)<sup>13</sup>—and in crowd interactions.

Do you agree, and how do you define “gatherings”?

**JC:** In many ways *Gatherings* continues where *Something is Happening* left off. It is about how things gather as matters worthy of attention. It studies the nature of the event, but it probes more deeply into its processes, and the constitution of the agencies, both human and nonhuman, that are involved in it, and which assemble with it. There is a reciprocity between actor and event: actors gather at the onset of the event, but the event also gathers and focuses its attendant actors. Events are configuration-zones, made up of compositional processes, tones, and atmospheres. These configuration-zones constitute a kinetic-kinesthetic dimension of experience, somewhere between the internal and the external. They carry with them

rhythmic infrastructures and sensations, which flow through attending actors, who transmit and absorb them, filter and calibrate them—dynamically constraining, corresponding, and converging them in gatherings. They help to illuminate the priorities of a shared situation, whether at the small-scale encounter or the large-scale crowd, as it is sustained in activity. Agential divisions and roles, which help to give directional form to experience, are not established a priori but are performatively enacted and maintained in situations and practices. It is a question of what *matters* in the situation: how the event *matters* in the embodied stances and positions of its attending actors, as it is sustained in practice. How the event *matters* in the evaluative alignments and postures taken in communicative encounters, however expressive, referential, or material. How the event *matters* in composites of evaluation, action, technique, and form, as these traffic between routinized physical activity and larger social and environmental structures, catalyzing guided action and situational transitions—priming skills, strengths, and weaknesses in patterns and integrating them into coordinated response systems. If there is a “source” of action, it is in the situation, not in the individual: the situation calls the action out of its attending actors. Actors cooperatively negotiate with the materials of an event, receiving knowledge from the circumstances, cultivating the skill for discerning the meanings that are embodied there. They attune to what the situation calls for, what it reveals as appropriate or opportune. This is an ethics of the event that is occupied not with selfhood but with a dynamic field of actors, copresent and cooperatively maneuvering.

*Gatherings* situates these ontologies of agency and event within emerging data-intensive environments. It gives me a specific historical circumstance to work with: a contemporary environmental space that, as I understand it, is driven by the techniques of tracking. I understand tracking not only as a technology, but as a practice—a science of movement optimization that has shaped a very specific kind of timespace. It has shaped an urban environment where movement is understood as strategically calculable: a world where all entities are regarded as locatable, yet subordinated to movement, and thus able to be tracked, modified, and transported with some degree of predictive regularity. It constitutes a defining organizational horizon for the movements of the world—a sensory, cognitive, and calculative ambience against which the phenomena of urban life are understood. I’m interested in how tracking has come to rely, increasingly, on algorithmic procedures, analytics, and automated systems, and incorporated into distributed network environments. It is enhanced by new sensing and locating technologies and embedded into mobile devices, buildings, vehicles, and urban infrastructures. We can see it at work in things like RFID, unmanned vehicles, “smart structures,” and intelligent materials systems. As well, we see it in consumer-driven practices of “urban sensing.” As the environment gains cognitive and agential abilities, we need to focus on the ontologies of this new urban space. Environments become able to directly sense phenomena and respond to what they apprehend, in ways that complicate distinctions between body and space, as well as between human, artifact, and computer. I want to consider what can be said to exist, materially, in the new information-intensive timespace of cities, in terms of all manner of human and nonhuman entities as they are increasingly endowed with cognitive and actuating ability, in ways that challenge conventional philosophical frameworks, in their reliance on modernist concepts of subjectivity, and their privileging of the interface between human and world.

**AZ:** What form will this project adopt? Are you thinking of creating some kind of installation or *dispositif*?

**JC:** It takes two forms: a book and a performance. The book focuses on developing the philosophical framework. It follows traditional forms of scholarly research, yet involves a

degree of rhetorical experimentation—forging new concepts that take on a life of their own, like good fictional characters, and at times exceed the boundaries of conventional forms. It is theory, but it is also an experiment with critical fiction, particularly from an anthropological perspective.

The performance is a kind of “live theater” that combines three-channel video installation, a sound environment, and a live stage performance, where I’m the primary actor. It incorporates approaches drawn from the worlds of visual art, literature, and dance. I convey experiences through allegory and enaction rather than solely through explanation and, hopefully, this will allow me to overcome the limits of specialized discourses and argumentative conventions. At the technological level, I’m exploring ways of using motion tracking and biosensing technology—tracking my body movements, gestures, and physiology in order to trigger, sculpt, and transform visual and sound events in real time. This connects to new practices of “self-tracking,” where the body’s physiological states become newly measurable and shared through new generations of biosensors. I’m also exploring ways of generating mixed reality environments—developing layered, augmented spaces, both visual and auditory, that can be navigated in real time by way of my actions and choices onstage, in ways that can foreground the “sentience” of environmental actors and the new forms of urban awareness that result.

In all of this I’m developing new approaches to performance and dance choreography, particularly as they register new structuring principles for movement and bring all kinds of new environmental actors into play. The sound design is extremely important in this work overall, and it is primarily through the immersive quality of the sound—augmented with video and onstage actor movements—that I want to engage the sensory and experiential dynamics of crowd interactions.

As regards the *dispositif*, I think that this work foregrounds the non-discursive in a way that Foucault called for but could not emphasize enough, and which has often been overlooked in favor of the discursive. It is also in dialogue with his call for the development of new relational modes. I develop a relationality whose foundational structure is not based in difference. I augment a critical approach with an “excessive” and affirmative one, where action is understood as political in the positive sense. This is a politics of everyday occurrences—a Foucaultian, ethical “arts of existence” whose transformative intensifications are not just about the self but about a larger field of actors. It renders such generalizing concepts as “power,” “control,” and “desire” inadequate, and in so doing, challenges the foundations of analyses of power based on voyeuristic separation and dominance—diminishing reductive or repressive models, based in enclosure and interiority, and shifting the emphasis to the dynamics of agential inclination and the cultivation of relevance, influence, and intimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), page number TK.

<sup>2</sup> “*Suspension* is an installation with video, digital animations, VRML, and projected light, including 5 stainless steel processing units with hardware, video camera, 8 stainless steel calibrating units, 7 RFs cast in fiberglass, and set of printed figures.” Jordan Crandall, *DRIVE* (Ostfildern-Ruit:Hatje Cantz/Graz: Neue Galerie, 2002), 250.

<sup>3</sup> Michel de Certeau, *L’invention du quotidien 1.arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Alphonso Lingis, “The Will to Power,” in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. D. B. Allison (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), page TK.

<sup>5</sup> VRML stands for Virtual Reality Modeling Language (or Virtual Reality Markup Language). It is a standard file format for representing 3D interactive vector graphics on the Web.

<sup>6</sup> “*Drive* is a video installation that combines traditional cinematic technology with new digital and military-based imaging systems. These include new tracking, identifying, and targeting technologies. Combining old and new, analog and network, civilian and military, *Drive* moves toward a post-cinematic language—one that has specific historical and political resonances. Harnessed to escalating new technologies and embedded within warfare complexes both national and corporate, these new image systems do not so much represent movements as track them.” <http://jordancrandall.com/drive/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Jordan Crandall, *DRIVE*, 2002. This book was published on the occasion of the exhibition of the video piece at the Galerie am Landesmuseum, Graz in 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Jordan Crandall, “Something is Happening,” *Code Drift: Essays in Critical Digital Studies: cds011* (April 24, 2010), <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=637>.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Valéry, *La Soirée Avec Monsieur Teste*, quotation translated by Anne Zeitz (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 26-27.

<sup>10</sup> *Gatherings* was first performed at **transmediale** CHECK CAPS, Berlin, in February 2011. The performance combines spoken word, choreography, three-channel video projection, and four-channel sound.

<sup>11</sup> The award is given jointly by transmediale and the Vilém Flusser Archive at the University of Arts, Berlin for outstanding theory and research-based digital arts practice.

<sup>12</sup> “*Heatseeking* is a series of 7 films shot in the San Diego/Tijuana border region. Captured on 16 mm film as well as on video from surveillance cameras, miniature ‘stealth’ cameras, and infrared thermal imaging systems, *Heatseeking* addresses the increasingly sophisticated and aggressive systems through which the border is policed.” <http://jordancrandall.com/heatseeking/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> “*Trigger* is a video installation that combines eye, camera, and weapon in a psycho-physiology of combat. It is shot with 16 mm film and video from surveillance cameras and military targeting systems. It also uses an eye-tracked synchronization system, which automatically aligns weapon and human gaze. In this case, seeing literally does become firing.” <http://jordancrandall.com/trigger/index.html>.