Locked On / Jordan Crandall's Heatseeking / by David Womack

Jordan Crandall
Port, 2000
C-print mounted on aluminum
photo courtesy Sandra Gehring Gallery

Before going to see Jordan Crandall's *Heatseeking* as part of the "Bitstreams" show at the Whitney, I took my lunch to Central Park. It was late winter and only a few black leaves still hung from the branches. Above my bench perched a tiny surveillance camera. The green cable clung like a vine to the tree trunk. Why would someone want to watch me as I ate my sandwich, and who? I imagined mayor Rudy Giuliani bent before a monitor, saying, "Do you see that? Ham. It's definitely ham." I was both nervous and excited to be the subject of attention.

According to Tony Geraghty (in "Tapping into the Future," *Index on Censorship*, March–April 2000), British and American intelligence agencies have set up a satellite network whose sole purpose is to monitor e-mails sent to and from anywhere in the world. *The Index on Censorship* reports that on a single day the average Londoner is filmed by more than 300 cameras. These cameras are increasingly linked to a network of databases containing such details as financial status, personal opinion and spending profiles. Though we may tip our hats to avoid the camera, we are skewered by our cell phones or credit cards, whose records can be obtained by police without a warrant or even notification. A level of surveillance once reserved for military targets is now being trained on ordinary civilians across the globe. As surveillance technology grows less obtrusive and more ubiquitous, the awareness of being studied is slipping imperceptibly into our daily consciousness. "We know, increasingly, that this atmospheric surround sees us, but we don't know how or what its images of us look like," artist Jordan Crandall explains (in *Parachute*, Oct.–Dec. 2000).

Eye of the Beholder

When I first enter the Whitney exhibition "Bitstreams," which features forty-nine artists who use digital technologies, I see few signs that new technology is anything more than a harmless tool for creating amusing diversions. John Klima has built what seems to be a large video game based on the idea of flying with birds. A San Francisco-based group called DISC has put a CD in a microwave and then drawn on it with markers. I study a print-out of a series of giant Ns drawn with a computer mouse by artist Jeff Elrod. Suddenly, explosions rock the gallery I am standing in. The woman next to me cringes and clutches her purse.

I follow the sounds down a short hallway to a darkened theatre. As I enter, a frightened child bumps against my thigh. On a large-format movie screen are thermal images showing a white stain of human heat as someone crawls through a green night. Night-vision cameras have picked up trace particles of light and reconstructed them as a pixilated landscape. Figures slowly emerge from the darkness. Jordan Crandall's *Heatseeking* (1999–2000) weaves together footage from a variety of media, including digital video from both a surveillance camera and an infrared thermal-imaging camera. Everyday objects reveal hidden dimensions as one sees the world through the eyes of these technologies. The images are haunting – both foreign and familiar. A simple sunrise takes on apocalyptic dimensions. A streetlight glows like a red star. The explosions are replaced by the tatting sound of a dot matrix printer.

A View from the Network

Crandall's experiments of the early and mid 1990s focused on text-based, virtual-reality sites called MOOs (Multi-user domain, Object Oriented). MOOs allow people to connect to the same site at the same time, and to interact with each other as well as manipulate cyber-objects. Crandall speaks of "the pleasure of movement, of masquerade, of newfound desires mediated by this strange telecommunicational space. In MOOs you continually enact the world around you, help bring it into being. If you do not speak, you are like a ghost, no one knows you are there."

As e-technology gained popularity, however, it quickly became clear that people did know he was there. Crandall's experiments were taking place in a highly accessible public space. He became increasingly aware of the corporate and political forces that were beginning to flood the Web. "It was a kind of growing up," he tells me. "A transfer from a sort of naive play to a state where we were aware of all the forces at work and had to develop a more critical and politically oriented practice. Otherwise, we risked becoming new product designers or doing R&D for the corporate world." Over the past decade Crandall has come to use digital technology less as a tool for making art

and more as a subject to explore through his art. In *Heatseeking* and a previous work, *Drive* (1998), he looks at the implications of networked technologies by examining the images they employ. Rather than having the audience log on to a site, he selects images produced by digital technologies and splices them together to make a film.

The technologies Crandall draws on have their origins in early proto-filmic techniques. In World War One, cameras were suspended from balloons that drifted over battlefields. Their lenses pointing downward, the cameras were set to take pictures at precise intervals for the purpose of detecting enemy troops and positions. When laid side by side and compared, such pictures could also be used to track and analyze movement, and thus to predict the future position of targets. These primitive technologies have evolved into the current networked surveillance systems that Crandall employs. Today's systems join images with a powerful database that is capable of recognizing complex patterns and making accurate predictions.

Image and Intent

In *Heatseeking*, we see a barren plain dotted with clumps of sage grass cut by narrow dirt roads and the muddy Rio Grande. This is the setting for the largest buildup of surveillance technology in the world. In order to understand the forces behind the development and use of sophisticated surveillance systems, Crandall traveled to the US/Mexico border in California. He received special permission to go out on night patrols with US border-patrol agents. He learned how to site along the horizon and detect a human heat-trace. Night after night he watched, as some of the military's most sensitive equipment was trained on exhausted immigrants, their clothes still wet from the crossing. Most of the images in *Heatseeking* were shot in the San Diego/Tijuana area using surveillance techniques and technology. The border is very important in Crandall's work. It serves as a metaphor for the complex and increasingly intimate relationship between humans and surveillance technology. Like its physical analogue, the border between humans and this technology seems from a distance to be an absolute division. On closer examination, however, we see that it is a place of interpenetration and flux. The border locates an active, highly charged exchange. Rather than taking sides – either condemning networked technology as an enemy of the individual or becoming dazzled by its factory sheen – Crandall focuses on the implications of this growing integration. This focus yields a complex and interesting portrait of a relationship that threatens the agency of the individual while opening realms of knowledge and pleasure.

Tracking the Future

In a sequence from *Drive* we see a delicate web of green lines surrounding a moving figure. The lines are produced by motion-tracking software that detects, identifies and analyzes movement. The software searches for patterns and calculates trajectories. The network thus moves beyond simple monitoring to the assessment of probabilities.

Although networked technology has existed for decades, it is only in the last few years that surveillance systems have moved beyond the passive recording of data to become active agents in shaping our visual environment. Every time you log on to a Web site, the system recognizes you as a unique user and accesses your profile. For profiling purposes, the advantage of the Web over, say, a credit-card receipt is that its observations are not limited to end results. The system watches the way you shop, what you look at and how you move through the site, adding information to your profile whether or not you make a purchase. Your profile is a highly valuable commodity that is now traded and sold by corporations. The profile and its implications are influencing the fields of computer science, psychology and law.

The true value of the profile lies not in what it tells us about who you are but in what it tells us about who you will be. If we know your desires and activities before you act, we can intercept or cater to them. On e-commerce sites, algorithms drive a collaborative filtering engine that matches your purchasing patterns to those of others. On a site like Amazon.com an intelligent agent may look for people that bought the same ten books you did in the same order. The agent then searches this set of profiles for the eleventh book and recommends it to you. The

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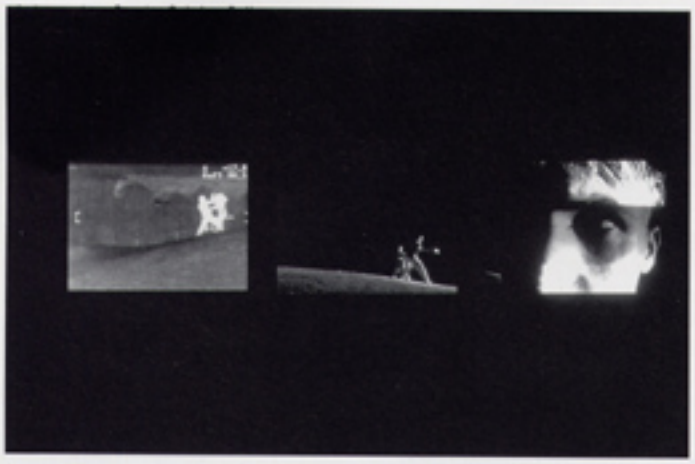
Heatseeking (Course.02), 2000
C-print mounted on aluminum



Jordan Crandall
Heatseeking (Beach.01), 2000
C-print mounted on aluminum
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more information contained in your profile and the profiles of others, the more accurate these recommendations can be. You may not even know your agent is working for you.

As David Pescowitz writes in *Scientific American* (June 2000), "In some sense your agent may know you even better than you do." As we begin to trust the system we open ourselves to manipulation. Your agent may steer you towards a more expensive purchase. Your agent may decide you are a credit risk. Your agent may know that you are 27.4% more likely to commit a crime than the person sitting at the computer next to you. In *Heatseeking*, Crandall's images of a nude woman trapped in an underground labyrinth explore the paranoia that such profiling systems can induce.

Angels Are Watching

Some condemn these surveillance technologies as violations of privacy. Others, however, choose to seek out the gaze of the system. This is shown most strikingly through the phenomenon of the Web Cam, which turns surveillance on its head. Individuals seek the system's gaze by installing cameras that broadcast their every action to the Web. "I don't mind people watching," writes Ana Voog on anacam.com. "In fact, I find it rather comforting, especially when I'm sleeping ... I feel like you are all angels watching over me."

In *Heatseeking* a woman lies naked on an operating table. The camera zooms in as a metal probe dimples her flesh, then cuts to a grainy black-and-white sequence shot from above. A dark line slowly scans the length of her body. A machine graphs the results. The camera cuts back and forth between the familiar horizontal anthropocentric perspective shot and the vertically oriented machine perspective. I feel simultaneously voyeuristic (watching as the figure on screen is revealed) and protective (doubting the underlying motives of the apparatus). The woman on screen seems to be experiencing a similar mixture of erotic charge and extreme anxiety. As the relationship between humans and machines expands, these may become the defining emotions of our age.

Jordan Crandall's work reveals hidden dimensions of this new physical and emotional landscape. Digital technologies extend our vision into strange new territories, vastly expanding our areas of influence. However, technology has a momentum of its own, one that drives new innovations as much as it is driven by them. We are left overwhelmed and excited, locked in a relationship we are no longer able to control. The system becomes a shadowy but palpable presence. The system watches from the trees, reads our mail, tells us we are beautiful while it sells us accessories. We don't trust it completely and yet we are drawn to it.