

Bird Watching

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Bird Watching is an interactive audio and video installation created specifically to comment on the invisible presence of space satellites. I focus on satellites to highlight the politics of remote sensing, amateurism, and identity. Bird Watching asks in a personal and intimate way if satellites, as tools of globalization, are transforming our conceptions of identity.

My playful cardboard birds challenge the perception of satellites as remote objective “eyes” and my distinctive low-tech approach makes remote sensing satellites accessible and their surveillance palpable. The “DIY” creativity of amateur inventors inspired the unusual combination of cardboard and sensors.

Bird Watching consists of six folded cardboard boxes that are suspended from the ceiling. Two boxes open and close each time a sensor is triggered. The other four boxes are embedded with proximity sensors and audio speakers. Each box’s sensors, speakers, and wiring are clearly apparent and available. The audio speaker in one box is connected to a VHF/UHF radio scanner that “listens” for transmissions being sent to ground stations from low earth orbiting satellites. The radio receiver sits on a small worktable and is connected to a satellite antenna. Next to the radio is a computer monitor that displays the internet satellite tracking application Predict. Predict visually represents the satellite’s orbit over the installation space and uses the computer’s voice to announce the satellite’s arrival when it is within radio range.

The apparatus that my satellites use for remote sensing are simple proximity sensors. These sensors trigger a sound to play through the satellites’ speakers and the sound’s duration and pitch is controlled by the participant’s proximity to the sensor. The sound’s pitch gets higher the closer one is to a sensor. Only when one maintains a specific distance from the sensor does the sound become comprehensible. I use sounds, such as a woman crying or children laughing, to remind us of the specificity of satellite data.

The obvious correlation between sound and physical presence fosters an awareness of the ongoing interchange between people and technology.

By emphasizing this exchange as well as initiating anticipation for the next orbiting satellite, I encourage participants to be “satellite watchers”. This notion of watching and being part of an active exchange inverts the usual power dynamic in surveillance by suggesting that the observed (or the watched) is an active accomplice who always has agency.

My installation further accentuates our complicated relationship with technology by using the proximity sensors to track the participant’s route in the installation as well. I worked with Jonathan Decker, a computer science student from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County to create a visualization that “maps” participants’ paths through the installation. This map is analogous to the satellite tracking on the computer monitor and these two adjacent tracking systems articulate the dialectic between the local and the global. The local and global are also linked through the viewer’s participation in the installation. Moving one’s body to activate the sound is an immediately local experience. However, over time participants realize that their interactions with the installation are being displayed in real time as an orbit. Thus a local action has global implications.

Bird Watching creates an environment that emphasizes what I refer to as the ecology of perception. I define the ecology of perception as a reciprocal relationship between self and environment. It is my belief that our experience of our environment informs our perceptivity of self. Bird Watching suggests that space satellites provide a unique perspective of the earth and its peoples. This new perspective has come to define us but my installation questions how we identify ourselves as global citizens with new responsibilities.



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