

Von unbemannten Flug-
objekten / Of Unmanned
Aerial Vehicles



GAMES OF COGNITION

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Countersurveillance and Resistance

For some years, a new approach with a stronger focus on the civilian use of drones has been developing alongside this political and military orientation. The spectrum ranges from works with a decidedly animistic tendency that place the drone at the center as the protagonist, to strategies for the appropriation and rededication of drones as a means of resistance. By enabling the appropriation of space/airspace (especially in the vertical perspective), drone technologies have undeniably led to a structural change in the public sphere: surveillance becomes countersurveillance, data collection becomes protest, and the violation of privacy becomes resistance. However, this movement cannot be classed as a democratization of airspace since this sphere is still predominantly regulated by commercial factors.

In his work *Litte ja Goabddá (Drones and Drums)* (2018), Ignacio Acosta examines the Sami's employment of drones, a North Scandinavian indigenous people who use them not only to track reindeer but also to protest a mining project in Gällak (Sweden). Gällak is one of Europe's largest iron ore deposits. A mining permit represents a huge invasion of the fragile ecosystem as it interferes with the reindeers' migration paths, and thus, with the Sami's way of life, whose community is defined by the coexistence with the reindeer and depends on reindeer breeding. In close collaboration with the activists, Acosta explores the connections between drones and drums as a means of navigation and communication. As a kind

of compass in nature, drums already served the Sami as symbols of resistance against Christianization in the 17th and 18th century. Drums were an integral part of a ritual practice and thus a central element in the Sami's exercise of religion: they were used to induce trances with the help of acoustic stimuli or for divination. In the context of the prosecution of the Sami's religious practices, the Christian authorities were especially opposed to drums as concrete objects of an illegitimate exercise of religion. The Sami were forced to surrender them.⁸ The acoustic (drones also have a very penetrating sound) and functional interrelation between drums and drones in Acosta's video highlights their close connection. The Sami's appropriation of drone technology, which enables countersurveillance as a means of documentation, transfers this tradition to the present and turns the drone into an instrument of resistance.

Drones were also used as instruments of protest and resistance during the demonstrations against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in the USA. The oil pipeline is 1,880 km long and leads from North Dakota over South Dakota to Illinois. The extensive protest actions (#nodapl) accompanying the construction drew attention to the threat to the potable water supplies and the violation of indigenous land rights. After several court rulings in favor of a discontinuation, Barack Obama put the pipeline project on hold. Donald Trump, on the other hand, advocated the completion of the project so that the pipeline opened on June 1, 2017. However, litigations at federal courts are still underway.

During the protests, drones served the purpose of documentation. A live stream available online generated a counter-public, a form of countersurveillance that gave the demonstrators a sense of protection. Often described as disembodied, the drones' perspective enabled a more objective grasp on reality. The changed perspective creates distance. From above, it is possible to capture the whole picture while remaining detached from the events at the same time.

In her video installation *Eyes in the Sky* (2017), Frédéric A. Belzile used a video sequence from the Indigenous Environmental Network with a soundtrack by the indigenous drone pilot Drone2Bwild. The latter sees drones as an extension of his spirit because their ability to fly bestows him with new mobility.

⁸ Håkan Rydving: *The Saami Drums and the Religious Encounter in the 17th and 18th Centuries*. In: *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 14 (1991), pp. 28–51, here p. 29–34.

Here the vertical view is perceived as an all-encompassing view. The drone becomes something like a divine eye that moves through the sky.

Interpreted as a sort of spiritual animal, the drone is blessed before it takes off on a flight. In his audio comment, the drone pilot talks about the inherent momentum of his drone, which simply flew away (it was probably hacked). Belzile merges several levels: the spiritual appropriation of drone technologies and their simultaneous use as a means of resistance.

Ensoulment and Animism

The spiritual appropriation of drone technologies is also the starting point of Korakrit Arunanondchai's work. In his video *Painting with history in a room filled with people with funny names 3* (2015), the artist has a partly fictional, partly real conversation with a drone he calls Chantri and gives a special role. Chantri filmed some of the video shots and was thereby involved in the production as a technological medium. At the same time, it represents a bodiless, metaphysical spirit with which Arunanondchai converses. Chantri's French voice belongs to the artist's mother. Both communicate beyond linguistic boundaries. The question of the artist's role in contemporary society is at the center of their conversation. Arunanondchai constructs the fictional identity of the 'Thai Denim Painter', who reflects on his own biography, the current socio-political situation in Thailand as well as questions surrounding spirituality, technologies, popular culture, and globalization. Thus, the drone also functions as an imaginary audience which engages in a dialog with the artist. The latter uses contemporary reinterpretations of symbols derived from Buddhism and Hinduism. The drone Chantri is equivalent to the

omnipresent bird figure Garuda. His antagonist is Naga, a snake deity that lives underwater. The two are linked by a kind of codependence. Garuda tries to control humanity from the air, while Naga is believed to have an archaic power that enables a temporary break with reality through magic and spirituality. As Arunanondchai explains, the drone Chantri becomes Garuda, while boychild, the main performer in the video, embodies Naga.⁹ In this way, the artist merges several fictional time levels from the past and future. Ambivalences verging between divine and human-animal, and archaism and science fiction become apparent.

Raphaela Vogel, whose intensive engagement with drone technologies started during her studies at the academy, also places the drone in the foreground as a protagonist. It interacts with the artist, or more specifically, the artist interacts with the drone. This reevaluation of the drone as an agent is also accompanied by a new kind of visibility. Usually the aim is to keep drones and even their technological and material consistency in the background, which is why they are mostly invisible. Vogel, however, follows a different strategy. She turns the camera around so that the drones' rotors protrude into the picture and thereby become visible. Like the horns of a bull, they are visually present the whole time and further emphasized by the sensors' red lights.

With the help of remote-controlled or preprogrammed drones, she creates multi-perspectival scenes that do not follow a linear narrative. Idiosyncratic camera perspectives, distortions, and reflections shot from above merge in an associative montage. However, the artist herself is always at the center: Vogel films and is filmed. In its interplay with the artist, who performs with an over-dimensional veil, the flight of the sometimes aggressively and sometimes gently approaching drone is reminiscent of a bullfight. Thus, the drone undergoes an animalistic ensoulment. Since the High Middle Ages, bull-runs and bullfights have been part of Spanish weddings.¹⁰ Raphaella Vogel also talks about presenting a wedding between herself and the drone in the video.

Her video *Prophecy* (2016) is accompanied by the metal band Soulfly's eponymous song. In contrast, the artist plays with gender clichés and presents herself in a bathing costume at the beach. Embedded in the expansive spatial installation, the Dixi pissoir

⁹ See Korakrit Arunanondchai by Martha Kirzenbaum. In: *Bomb Magazine*, August 21, 2019. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/korakrit-arunanondchai/> (accessed: February 5, 2020).

¹⁰ See Karl Braun: *Toro. Spanien und der Stier*. Berlin: Wagenbach 2000, pp. 62–64.