

Black Ships Ate the Sky: Drones and Photography at apexart

Decolonized Skies at apexart

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291 Church Street (between Walker and White streets)

New York, 212 431 5270



George R. Lawrence, San Francisco earthquake ruins, 1906. Black-and-white reproduction of photographic print, 42 3/4 x 15 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Chicago History Museum.

When George R. Lawrence took his first aerial photographs in the early 1900s he used a train of 17 kites to launch a 50-pound camera and a stabilizing rig almost 2,000 feet skyward. The picture he captured of San Francisco in ruins after the 1906 earthquake and subsequent fires, which destroyed 80% of the city and cost nearly 3,000 lives, is arguably his most famous and became something of an emblem of that tragedy. It represented the scope of the devastation in one sweeping image, but also demonstrated how such a view could offer important information to residents on the state of their surroundings.

His photograph serves as the backdrop to apexart's "Decolonized Skies." Curated by the High&Low Bureau (the duo Yael Messer and Gilad Reich of Amsterdam and Tel Aviv),

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the exhibition looks at what is communicated through the aerial view — how it has been controlled by state and corporate entities who own the technology, resources, and access, and who dole out information as they see fit. The advent of the age of unmanned aerial vehicles — known colloquially as “drones” or UAVs — has made this issue even more pressing. “Decolonized Skies” looks at the activists, scientists, and artists attempting to reclaim this space and highlights some rather startling facts about the use and abuse of the bird’s-eye view.



Forensic Architecture: Eyal Weizman (Principal Investigator), Susan Schuppli (research & coordination), Jacob Burns (research), Steffen Krämer (video compositing & editing), Reiner Beelitz (architectural modeling), Samir Harb (architectural modeling), Zahra Hussain (research assistance), Francesco Sebregondi (research assistance), Blake Fisher (research assistance), Drone Strikes, Threshold of Detectability, 2014. Images and text on light table. In collaboration with HKW, Berlin (Anselm Franke and Eyal Weizman). Courtesy of the Forensic Architecture and apexart.

“Some drone-fired missiles can drill a hole through the roof before burrowing their way deep into buildings, where their warheads explode,” the text on a backlit tabletop by Forensic Architecture titled *Drone Strikes, Threshold of Detectability* (2014) explains. It goes on, “The size of the hole the missile leaves is smaller than the size of a single pixel in the highest resolution to which publicly-available satellite images are degraded. This has direct implications for the documentation of drone strikes in satellite imagery, which is often as close to the scene as most investigators can get.” Forensic Architecture’s two accompanying videos show how their team gathers spatial analysis in the wake of attacks, with the aim of creating legal evidence for international prosecution teams,

political organizations, NGOs, and the United Nations. But as they point out, the perpetrator of a drone strike executes it with far better information than they and other investigators have access to. If this seems contradictory to the normal way of things, where the state investigates when crimes have been committed, it’s because in drone warfare the roles are reversed: it’s the state agencies doing the killing and independent organizations doing the forensics.

The Pentagon’s fleet of drones numbers approximately 10,000. The Federal Aviation

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Administration predicts that in less than 20 years there will 30,000 flying over U.S soil alone. Ruben Pater's *Drone Survival Guide* (2013) is essentially a field guide for UAVs and was created with these facts in mind. The poster — which is provided free to viewers — identifies the shape, country of origin, and purpose of the most widely used drones; describes a number of methods that can be used to avoid detection; and gives a short paragraph on drone hacking, explaining how the data link between the pilot and the vehicle can be intercepted, remotely transferring control to the interceptor.



Ruben Pater, *Drone Survival Guide*, 2013. Offset printed on Chromolux ALU-E mirrored paper 19 x 13 inches. Courtesy of the artist and apexart.

The thought of citizen interference with government or corporate technology may be more unsettling than the fact the technology exists at all, but it at least marks a change from the status quo of government or corporate control and manipulation of the information, and especially images, that this technology provides. *Elements of Composition* (2011), from the collaborative duo Bik Van der Pol shows the alteration of Google Earth's supposedly objective image of the artists' public intervention, where the text "As Above, So

Below" was painted on the parking-lot bitumen near the Essex Street Market and was proven visible through commercially available satellite photos. Originally conceived as daily walking tours of the Lower East Side, this project's presentation in "Decolonized Skies," as a lengthy audio piece, 48-page booklet, and framed image, make it hard to take in.

What seems at first to be a sparse show actually requires a huge amount of time. It was wise of the curators not to attempt to include anything more; at the same time, not all the projects were presented in a way that was conducive to understanding.

Peter Fend's *Über die Grenze: May Not Be Seen Or Read Or Done* (2012) collages try to explain the pioneering work that he, with Ocean Earth Development Corporation, conducted in the early '80s, reinterpreting the data seen in images of geopolitical hotspots like the site of the Chernobyl disaster. But the large 35-by-50-inch handmade

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posters with scrawled-text printouts, magazine clippings, and colored-pencil illustrations did not feel like the best way of communicating this research, and viewers would need to do a fair amount of their own interpreting to grasp Fend's explanations and discoveries.



Peter Fend, *Über die Grenze: May Not Be Seen Or Read Or Done (Excerpt)*, 2012. Collage (color laserjet copies, b/w laserjet copies, magazine pages, maps), colored pencil, ink and architectural tape on paper, 50 x 38 inches. Courtesy of the artist and apexart.

So while some of these projects are clearly more effective at communicating a point than others, all make attempts to provide vital information on what is at stake in the aerial view. While it's almost a little too much to take in at once, the exhibition does manage to elucidate on some hitherto little-known facts about how we are being observed from the sky that will open any viewer's eyes. It's said that knowledge is power; does that apply when one is being made aware of their relative powerlessness?

<http://www.artcritical.com/2014/10/09/juliet-helmke-on-decolonized-skies/>