

maria

rapicavoli:

a cielo

aperto



A *Cielo Aperto*, 2014, Research image

International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP)

Maria Rapticavoli:
A Cielo Aperto

February 27 - April 4, 2014

Foreword

This publication accompanies the exhibition Maria Rapicavoli: *A Cielo Aperto*. Each year ISCP presents two solo exhibitions of newly commissioned work by ISCP residents. This is Rapicavoli's first solo exhibition in the United States, and it collapses the distance between this country and her native Italy by bringing into the open the power relations played out in militarized airspace over Sicily.

Here, Rapicavoli presents two diametric views of Sicily: the military satellites, antennas, drones, and maps that transform the landscape, alongside more commonly known images of Sicily's open skies, impressive light, palm trees and volcanoes. Through a poetic reading of the political, she reveals the equal entanglement of the sky and the ground by the strategic interests of nation-states, and especially by the United States' utilization of Sicily's optimum location at the crossroads of the Mediterranean.

I would like to thank Maria for her thoughtful exhibition and Soyoung Yoon for a catalog essay that unpacks the complex work in the exhibition, Shinnie Kim and Roberto Jamora from ISCP who organized the exhibition's logistics, and our 2014 Exhibition Advisory Committee Jesse McKee, Hilde Methi and Lumi Tan.

Kari Conte, Director of Programs and Exhibitions



MUOS-Construction Site, 2013, C-print, 40 x 60 in.

The Soothsayer's Gesture

Soyoung Yoon

The soothsayer's gesture: in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), the writer reflects on his love of the soothsayer's gesture, of cutting out a piece of the sky with a staff, as the scene for a foretelling of the future: "It must have been a fine thing to see, in those days: that staff marking out the sky, the one thing that cannot be marked."¹ In the exhibition *A Cielo Aperto*, artist Maria Rapicavoli declares a similar devotion to the solemn lightness of such gestures, primarily through her work in large format photographs and small gauge film. But in Rapicavoli's work, the gestures take place within a heavily demarcated and contested airspace — a cielo aperto, or the open sky, of Sicily, Italy and within the context of a very different apparatus of foreseeing than that of the soothsayer's staff. Rapicavoli's exhibition title plays on two connotations of "open sky": the sky as a space that should be open to all, and the opening up of the sky as a militarized airspace. The works in this exhibition confront the ramifications of the strategic importance of the Sicilian skies for the United States, from the Allied Invasion in 1943 and the establishment of the second largest U.S. naval air station at Sigonella, Sicily in 1959. As the center of U.S. naval air operations in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, Sicily is "The Hub of the Med."

The focal point of *A Cielo Aperto* is an installation based on a classified map of the U.S.-controlled airspace above Sicily, delineating, among other restricted and prohibited sites, the flight corridors used by American drones. The viewer walks under lengths of white plastic string affixed between two facing walls; the strings cast shadows that trace the drones' corridors and the shapes of controlled airspace from the military map. The map is disassembled into a jigsaw puzzle on a collaged sky, projections of brilliant blue Sicilian sky in bits and pieces. Except for their plastic sheen, the strings themselves are barely registered as delineations of corridors or passageways, but are noticed

¹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 47.

for the inadvertent, almost instinctual ducking of our head and hunching of one's shoulders as we pass beneath and through them. The spatial delineations of Fred Sandback's strings provide an effective counterpoint to Rapicavoli's installation: in contrast to the precision and focus of Sandback's virtual planes and the visual twang of their colored yarn, what is diagrammed here is a diffusive and yet persistent shadow play. It suggests a dense and thickly contoured airspace, not so much perceived as felt: a sensorial mapping. The effect is a particular sense of enclosure, the closing of the open sky.

The outposts on the frontier of this new enclosure are a naval air station — and a geosynchronous Earth orbit (GEO) satellite and its ground station antenna. The latter is the subject of Rapicavoli's large format photographs, which align the entrance to the installation. The satellite in question is one of four (with an additional in-orbit spare) that connect to antennas at four ground stations in Virginia, Hawaii, Australia, and Italy. The Italian ground station is — or rather will be — located in Niscemi, Sicily, a mere 60 kilometers from U.S. Naval Air Station Sigonella. The satellites, the ground stations and their antennas, and the fiber optic terrestrial network connecting the ground stations, are primary components of the massive infrastructure of a next generation military communication system, the Mobile User Objective System (MUOS). MUOS is a military ultra-high-frequency satellite communications system for the United States Department of Defense. Its ostensible claim is to provide smartphone-like capabilities, including voice, video, and data connection, at a rate improved by 16 times, to "mobile users." Mobile users? According to an official press release for MUOS, mobile users range from submarines to infantry to armored vehicles to fighter planes to drones, connected to each other through a series of overlapping circles, projected by a satellite that rises above them all. The satellite and its ground station antenna are neatly nicknamed as the "36,000 kilometer tall cell tower": the dream of a modern-day Tower of Babel.

MUOS is represented as a technology — and fantasy — adequate to the spatio-temporality of contemporary warfare: anytime, anywhere, everywhere, always. The rhetoric of the official press release renders commonplace the function of MUOS, associated with our familiar and all-too-frequent habits of checking for cell-phone coverage and signal strength. The emphasis of the rhetoric is on “vital connectivity,” that is, connection on-demand, regardless of location and environmental conditions, regardless of place and time. To connect is not so much to link as to live, to be. And here one is tempted to recall a recent iteration of *Apple’s Life on iPad* advertising campaign, and its overwrought appropriation of Walt Whitman’s poem “O Me, O Life” that reads “*What good amid these, O me, O life? Answer: that you are here. That life exists and identity. That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.*” In Rapicavoli’s large format photographs of the MUOS ground station in Niscemi, Sicily, the infrastructure that supports such rhetoric of “vital connectivity” is presented as a veritable spider’s web. A vertical antenna is centered and cropped as a singular figure against the sky, much like a spindly, skeletal reconstruction of the Sicilian palm tree. The antenna’s arrangement of electric conductors appears as an intricate but brittle latticework of lines, curves, and knots that stretches over the picture plane.

On August 9, 2013, an estimated two thousand people marched to protest the construction of the MUOS ground station in Niscemi, Sicily. Rapicavoli’s photographs were taken during the heat of this protest — the march to the gates, the clash with the police, the entry into the restricted site, the freeing of the few activists who had climbed the vertical antennas the day before. The protest was one among several sustained demonstrations over two years (pickets, blockades, sit-ins, occupations) that put the construction on hold for six months in 2013. The Niscemi site is the last of the MUOS ground stations to be completed, and the key to the full operational capability and success of MUOS as a total system. For the protestors, from local communities



HF (3-30 MHz), 2013, C-print, 37 x 25 in.

as well as the No-MUOS movement, there are serious concerns about the effects of radiation pollution from the electromagnetic fields surrounding the antennas. Furthermore, they critique the increasing militarization of Sicily by the U.S., all the more so as the Niscemi site is appropriated from one of the few remaining wild cork oak woods in the country (la Sughereta), a Natural Reserve and a designated site of European Community Interest.

Thus, it is important to note that Rapicavoli's photographs of the construction of the Niscemi MUOS ground station are also a document of construction on hold. The unsettling stasis is especially pronounced in the photograph of the three 18.4 meter parabolic antennas. The large circular dishes have yet to be attached to their supporting truss structures, so the dishes are grounded, sitting side by side, a triptych of three empty bowls in a monumental still life. The dishes are positioned to obliquely recede towards the centered horizon, ever-so-slightly torquing the horizon line around it — a lost world but for the minute figure of the helicopter in an otherwise seemingly motionless sky.

For Rapicavoli, the most acute problem in the extended capacities of MUOS is their deployment in controlling the so-called "latency" in drone strikes. "Latency" refers to the few second delay between what the drone sees and what the drone pilot sees, the delay in video feed due to the time it takes for a signal to travel back and forth from a satellite. From the perspective of the drone pilots, latency is a matter of distance that must be overcome, as it hinders their ability to hit a moving target.² However, in recent debates about the efficacy of drone strikes, critics have underscored not only a spatio-temporal distance, but also a radical difference of experience from air and from ground.³ From the point of those few living under drone strikes, the experience is much more dispersed and relentless, inhabiting a field charged with unrelieved fear of the invisible and the sound of "a low grade, perpetual

² Mark Mazetti, "The Drone Zone," *New York Times*, July 6, 2012.

³ See, for instance, "Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians From U.S. Drone Practices in Pakistan," a detailed report by Stanford International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic (IHRCRC) and Global Justice Clinic (GJC) at NYU School of Law at <http://www.livingunderdrones.org>

buzzing”: “Sight on one side and sound on the other. Focus on one side and diffusion on the other.”⁴ There is a need to emphasize “the diffuse but chronic deterioration of life,” Nasser Hussain argues, which “offers a thicker definition of civilian harm” — a need to reframe the debate about the efficacy of drone strikes, to problematize and move beyond body counts and rhetorics of precision and focus, of transparency, ubiquity, instantaneity.

The problem then is the very problematization of “latency” itself — a problem that is directly posed in Rapicavoli’s small gauge film, *Disrupted Accounts* (2013). It is a short 8mm film of restricted Sicilian military bases and the surrounding landscape of Mount Etna, interspersed with film of a computer screen playing publicly available online video and audio of drone footage. What is preserved and insisted upon by Rapicavoli are the latencies, the delays and breaks, the noise, the crackle of static —not least the use of the “obsolete” technology of a standard 8mm film camera. Rapicavoli’s camera allowed her access into the restricted sites (the soldiers took it to be but a harmless toy), and so one could also claim that the camera restricted or rather impeded her ability to access and document the sites with accuracy. With a standard 8mm film camera, the spool of film must be manually removed and reversed halfway through filming; for every couple or so minutes of film, then a pause and a re-loading. In the careful re-loading of film, there is also the risk of excessive exposure to light: the fogging or even loss of image. Accuracy then is not the practical criteria of Rapicavoli’s film. *Disrupted Accounts* is not a document about restricted sites, the disclosure of heretofore unseen images; indeed, we see very little. Rather, the few precarious images retrieved and stitched together in this short 8mm film points to the existence of images lost or left behind, images not taken. Not the facts of the film, the accuracy and stability of its representation, but its activity, filming as act: the soothsayer’s gesture. The film testifies to the artist’s presence there-and-then. As Barthes would argue of the

⁴ Nasser Hussain, “The Sound of Terror: Phenomenology of a Drone Strike,” *Boston Review*, October 16, 2013, <http://www.bostonreview.net/world/hussain-drone-phenomenology>

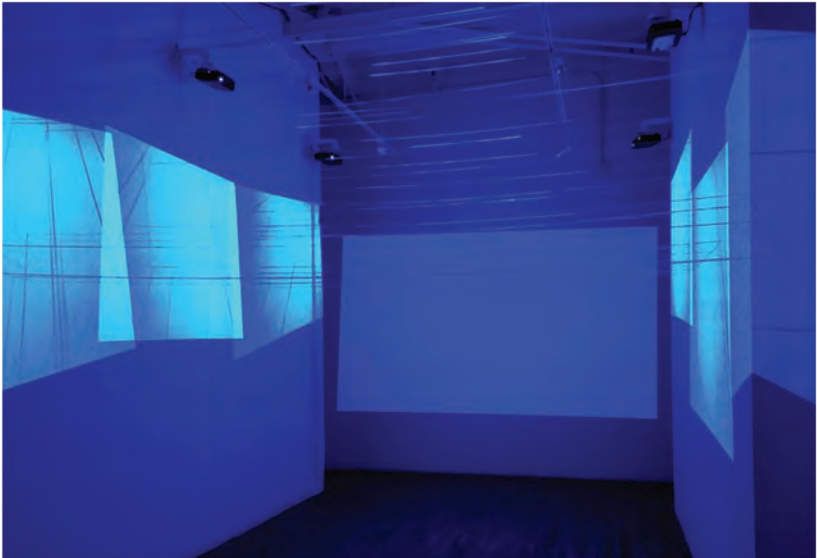
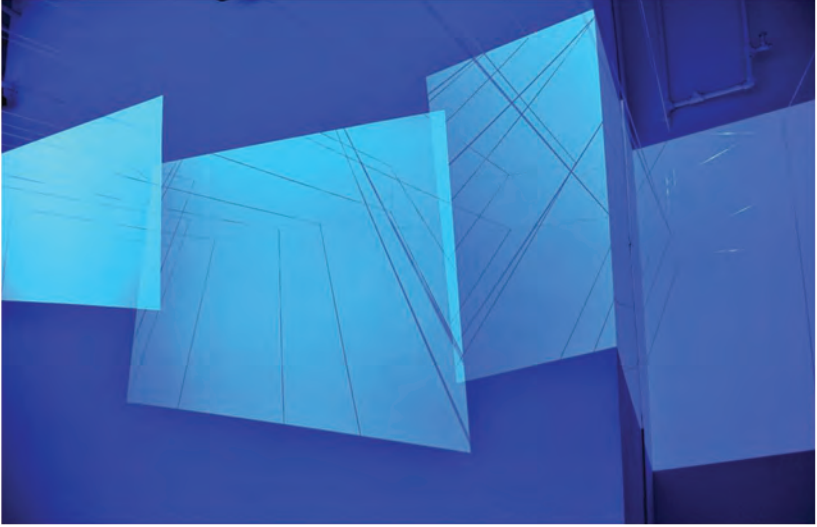


Disrupted Accounts, 2013, 8mm transferred to digital video, 7:28 min.

“evidential force” of the photographic image, “its testimony bears not on the object but on time.”⁵ For Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, the essence of photography is in its latency: “From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star.”⁶ In *Disrupted Accounts*, it is the tactility and intimacy of the act of (not) taking pictures, the back and forth of past and present, which is re-inscribed in the audio-visual image of the very sites that seek to snuff out such play, to collapse into a “real-time” where the what-has-been - and the what-will-be - is what-is-no-longer.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1981), 89.

⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 80-1.



Installation view

Maria Rapicavoli lives and works in New York. She has recently completed the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) Residency Program and was a fellow in the Whitney Independent Study Program. She received her MA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths College University, London in 2005 and her BA from the Academy of Fine Arts, Catania in 2001. She is the recipient of numerous grants and prizes including the NCTM e l'arte. She was nominated for the Talent Prize in Italy and she received the DEMO/Movin' UP grant in 2011.

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