

## REVIEW

### Maria Rapicavoli: A Cielo Aperto

INTERNATIONAL STUDIO & CURATORIAL PROGRAM  
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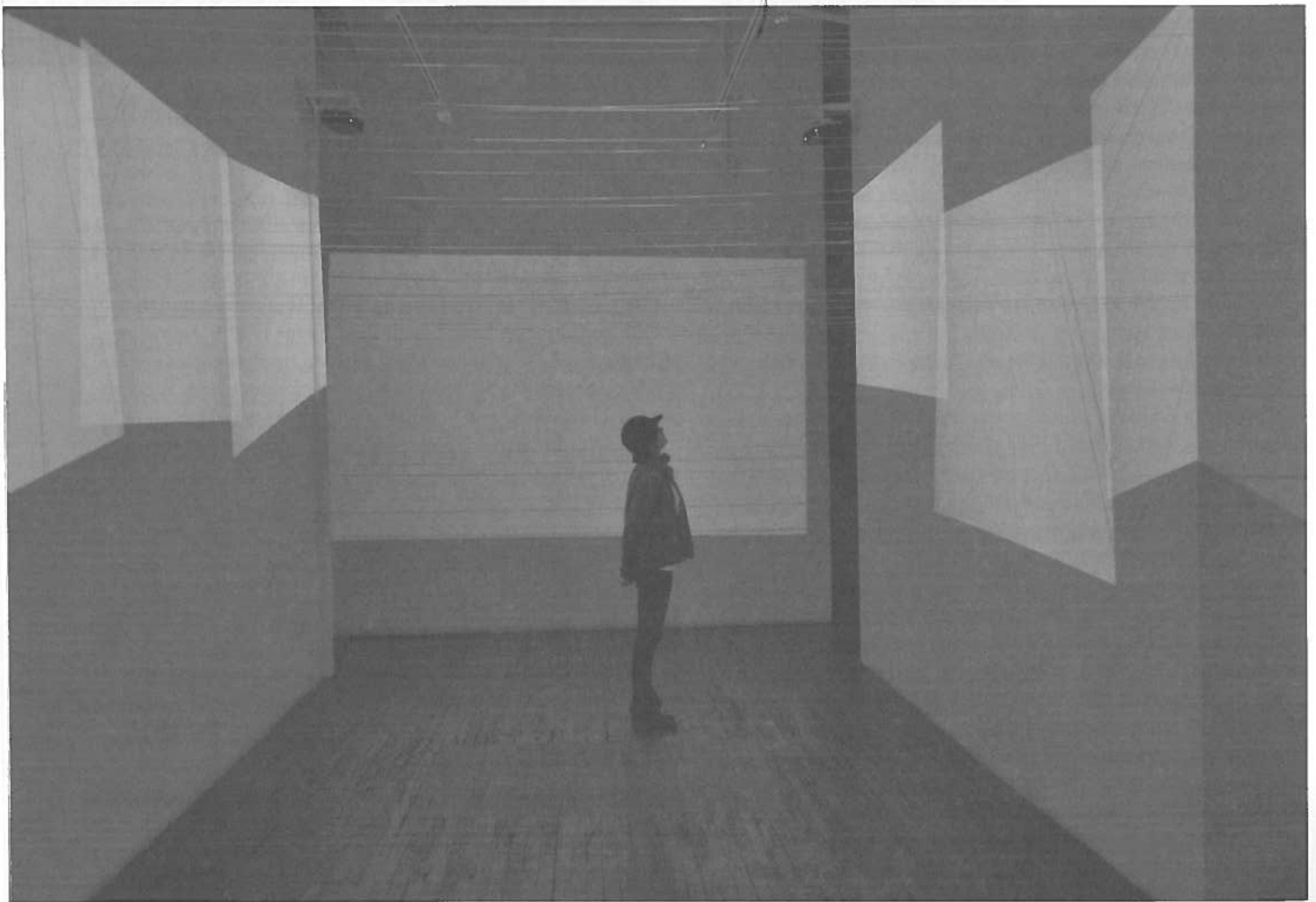
*A Cielo Aperto* (An Open Sky) was the title of Sicilian artist Maria Rapicavoli's solo exhibition at the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP), where she was chosen to present a body of work that she developed while in residence between January and June 2014. The two countries she straddles, Italy and the United States, and their military collusion, in particular, provided fodder for this new project.

Tinged with romanticism, optimism, and universality, the title evoked a benign state of celestial bliss, but the presented works belied any saccharine connotations of gazing at the sky. The first set of photographs viewers encountered upon entering the exhibition depicted a subject matter that is not easy for civilians

to identify. What appears to be a remote location—no villages or cities are in sight—is dominated by web-like structures radiating from a central tower. Their identity and purpose mysterious, the structures elicit a sense that one is trespassing on forbidden territory. That was indeed the case for Rapicavoli and approximately two thousand protesters who, on August 9, 2013, marched to the photographed site, where an American Mobile User Objective System (MUOS) ground station was in construction in Niscemi, Sicily. An accompanying text written by scholar Soyoung Yoon unpacked the meaning of this acronym, noting that "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." In other words, it is a control center for military dispatches, connected to an invisible and massive network that we, as civilians, cannot access.

The irony of the title—an open sky—became more palpable throughout the exhibition. Navigating the galleries at ISCP re-

Installation view of *A Cielo Aperto* (2014) by Maria Rapicavoli



quires walking through a series of corridors and passageways, and Rapicavoli used this limiting architecture to her advantage. The artist set the scene with the photographs at the exhibition entrance, while smaller photographs of MUOS along the corridor drew viewers into a larger hall where they were enveloped in an immersive seven-channel video installation. The video projections were of a single still image, a photograph of the Sicilian sky taken by Rapicavoli. Hung at odd angles, the projectors beamed down overlapping trapezoids of blue that could very easily be mistaken for the blank screen of the projector. They might as well have been, because the cobalt glow in the stillness and the quiet of the room (there was no sound in the installation) conjured an image of a dark underground bunker filled with the eerie light of computer screens.

The sense of being in a hermetically sealed space of virtual control was amplified by the knowledge that the photographs of MUOS hung just outside of the hall. A delicate network of strings that cut through the space above the viewer's head and cast shadows onto the walls acted as a sensorial three-dimensional counterpart to the photographs. The shapes formed by the strings and their shadows, we learned from Yoon's text, were based on a classified map of aerial corridors used by American drones. Inserted into this installation as a living, breathing body, the viewer broke the illusion of the screen-mediated reality a "mobile user" has to engage in order to fly the drones and, in this way, became key to completing the work. A map—which is what Rapicavoli effectively recreated in the installation—is an abstraction of physical geography into miniaturized form. The viewer, casting giant shadows onto flight paths, disrupted the scale of the

aerial chart, and congested the virtual air traffic with an undeniable human presence.

In the midst of this installation, the only detectable movement was that of the viewer. Breaking this stillness was a small projection placed in the adjacent alcove. The sound of this film, titled *Disrupted Accounts* (2013), provided relief after the deafening silence of the six overlapping still-image videos. Transferred from 8mm footage of Rapicavoli's forays around restricted military sites or locations bearing traces of military presence, the film showered the viewer with the sound of the wind, the roar of military vehicles, and voice recordings from web footage of pilots in Nevada directing unmanned aircrafts in Afghanistan. The suggestion of movement—of the viewer/photographer/videographer—in this work is important because it foregrounds the agency and the subjectivity of the image-maker. For Rapicavoli, the work is not about providing an evidentiary claim, but is a way for her to visually imagine and bring to light what is normally made invisible.

The textual guide provided by Yoon therefore plays a critical role in understanding Rapicavoli's project on the coded and covert operations of the military. Yet one wonders what might be gleaned from encountering this work without reading the text. Perhaps that is part of the point. We would not understand the significance of the string-and-shadow drone maps even if they were laid out in plain sight as typical maps—unless, that is, we are willing to see beyond what is in front of us. It is up to the viewer to peer through the patches of blue and thin shades of black—Rapicavoli's reconstructed visualization of what is intentionally left unseen.

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## afterimage

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