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Surveillance, bias, and healing through re-articulation: An interview with Paula Albuquerque on her recent solo exhibition in Amsterdam

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In Autumn 2020, the artist and media researcher Paula Albuquerque presented a major exhibition of her work at Nieuw Dakota in Amsterdam, titled Enter the Ghost: Haunted Media Ecologies. Concerned with topics of surveillance, colonial trauma, and media hauntology, the artworks in the show provide a poetic engagement with the violence of contemporary technologies. The artist's perspective on sonic warfare, racial bias and mechanisms of visibility feels especially urgent in this moment of global lockdowns and social shielding, when many of us have been forced to rely on digital technologies for communication and connection. As Albuquerque states in the text accompanying the exhibition: '[…] surveillance has become the world's home'. The text forms a chapter in Albuquerque's newly published book, which accompanies the exhibition and contains contributions by Alice Smits, Flavia Dzodan, Matthew Groh, Nim Goede, and Richtje Reinsma. Both the book and the exhibition build on in-depth research into decolonial practices in digital image technologies and the cinematic apparatus. The five installations that made up the exhibition were accessible to a limited audience for the duration of the show (25 October – 29 November 2020) due to the pandemic containment measures.

Albuquerque is a visual artist and scholar living and working in Amsterdam. Her work is informed by intersectional decolonial practices, focusing on visual technologies both analogue and digital, surveillance, and the con-

struction of operative imagery. Previous works and research include interventions with footage from CCTV cameras and drones, and the book *The Webcam as Emerging Cinematic Medium* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018). Albuquerque is a senior researcher at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy of the Arts and Head of the Master of Artistic Research at the University of Amsterdam.

Astrid Korporaal: You mentioned how important it was to see the works physically in the space, how was this experience for you?

Paula Albuquerque: Upon entering the space of the exhibition, there was a screen on the left, which was showing footage made by a drone that was shot inside the gallery. Right in front of the visitors, as they entered, stood a container, from which the audio recording of 21 drones was emitted. This gave people the impression that they were themselves being filmed by drones in the space.

Korporaal: You were there in the space, so did you notice how people reacted?

Albuquerque: I noticed that visitors were concerned about being filmed, that they were actually looking for the source. This is uncommon in the Netherlands, because we live in a no-fly zone, and that is why bringing that other reality to the gallery was important to me. I also brought the outside surroundings into the space. At the time the area around the gallery had become a huge construction site, and I decided to bring these materials – the sand, the fence – inside the space, to create a relationship between inside and outside, creating discomfort. Let's say, you didn't feel as safe as you would feel in a standard 'white cube'.

Korporaal: I think it's interesting that you describe the exhibition as 'an ecology of media'. The word ecology often has associations with symbiosis and interrelation in a very positive sense. Whereas what you are talking about is also a very uncanny, unsettling ecology of things coming together.

Albuquerque: I absolutely agree. I look at media as being part of an ecology, as you cannot have drones without the internet. And you cannot have the internet without very basic algorithms that already carry biases in relation to race and gender. All of these keep on feeding each other and ensuring the capital is there to keep on blossoming and developing.

Korporaal: Yes, it's really important that you are working with these biases, which many people are not actively aware of although they are all around us. They are even in film technologies, in any kind of visual medium

actually, and it seems that by re-connecting these elements you are trying to make people aware of the violence of looking and being seen.

Albuquerque: Awareness-raising has been a part of my work since I started making artworks with webcams 22 years ago. So that is one aspect. The other is not just saying: 'hey, this is what the medium is doing', but also looking into what the medium can do if you keep on pushing its boundaries and experimenting with it to create objects that are not meant to be produced by it. For example, when it comes to the composition with the drones, I built a soundscape inside the container. The drones are in place to produce imagery, not sound. Yet the sound they produce is being used in sonic warfare, which causes PTSD in millions of people who live in these zones of exception. By creating a composition, I'm making something else out of their sound, which hopefully reaches beyond awareness-raising.

Korporaal: This reminds me of the importance of affect, and the work of Forensic Architecture. There's a similarity of working with forensic technologies and intervening in their function. But where Forensic Architecture sometimes positions itself more as a tool for standing up to power and providing information, your work also has this very strong affective charge. And the intervention in yours is perhaps also more related to the ways we experience this as individuals, and a sense of emotional connection with these tools and technologies. Would you agree?

Albuquerque: I'm a great admirer of Forensic Architecture – I don't mention them in my book, but they are a constant inspiration. Obviously, we also have very different agendas. Forensic Architecture work on an assignment basis, as they make sure that justice is brought to those who otherwise wouldn't have the means or the possibility to even start any sort of investigation into governmental crimes. I absolutely praise their work. My aim is to look at documentary media and experiment with them to create something that is also of artistic nature. Meaning that by doing this I am altering standard medium-specific narratives. I see the potential for these media to become artistic tools and materials that offer different outcomes and other versions of the same reality that is supposedly being recorded all the time. The latter is too one-sided, and I feel that we have to break it up and offer a multitude of approaches. Forensic Architecture are very resourceful because they work with artists who have a flexibility that forensic experts wouldn't have. But yes, I think this process and its affective potential is extremely strong.

Korporaal: In your work there is a sense of reconnecting us to places of sonic warfare, where people in Western countries are perhaps less familiar

with this emotional charge. But the use of drone imagery in works like *To Those Below* also made me think of the expression 'if you're not paying for the product, you are the product'. By using these technologies, we are constantly creating content.

Albuquerque: For the attention economy, yes.

Korporaal: And this is also part of our lives that is invisible, or ignored, and it is creating a product that is hidden from us. Whereas your work might be thought of as a way of reconnecting us to what we are producing ourselves.

Albuquerque: From the responses I received to the exhibition I feel that people of an older generation are more resistant. Actually, the ones with decision-making power were the ones that were most resistant to the work. As if the violence was something external to them. While the younger visitors fully engaged with the installations, and seemingly recognised that when you play around with technologies like Deepfake, you produce more capital for these technologies to keep on developing. Moreover, that they can be used in ways that keep perpetrating racial biases. They were completely involved, and for them it was knowledge that they were acquiring and which they understood, because they are acquainted with algorithm logics.

Korporaal: Do you think young people are also more aware of this sense of violence, and that they feel it in their daily lives? When I speak to my students about these topics, they understand the problematics very well, but also question whether there is an alternative. And listening to you speak now, I think that carrying around the knowledge that one is part of this system but not having a clear alternative could be a form of violence.

Albuquerque: I think they definitely feel the weight of responsibility, they do not resist it. I now feel amongst my students at the Rietveld a very serious consciousness of what the potential of an archival positioning might be. This awareness was not there ten years ago. Still, obviously, there is a sense of powerlessness against technological development. In general. But I feel that if you understand that you can use these media in a different way, it can already feel empowering and open several other avenues where you may believe that you can have some influence. The possibility of fighting against the system always feels incredibly overwhelming, especially for young people. But that's nothing new, right?

Korporaal: Yes! And to me this weight of responsibility also connects to your interest in hauntology and to ghosts and trying to make some of these ghosts visible or felt. An association I had with the container filled with sand in the work *Overhead 21*, besides that of the desert drone pilot's station, was

to the refugee crisis, and I was wondering whether this was also a connection you had in mind? Thinking of all these people who are, in a way, trying to remain unseen and undetected in order to travel, and at the same time they are visible in the media, but their images are like ghosts. We see these images, yet somehow it is easier to disconnect.

Fig. 1: View of To Those Below and Overhead 21.

Albuquerque: Yes, that is also the case with the images of people of colour who are being identified as criminals or as terrorists. This has to do with representation and its one-sidedness. Things are changing a little bit, but when it comes to refugees who are people with absolutely no rights, they are being represented by the media but not exactly visible. The persons themselves are not visible. They are represented as a homogenous mass, where we do not see individuals. They are not allowed to become their own subject. They remain another's objects of observation. Let's say that they are ghosts who are not allowed to haunt, because they do not have a shape, they are not felt, they merge with the background. This is part of the study I have been carrying out, because I don't only look at the most recent technologies when studying ghosts. I study all the way back to the dawn of photography. To the moment when mechanical reproduction came to prove that ghosts actually do exist, because they have a visual manifestation: the spectre. And I don't want to get too technical, but basically, modes of exposure still have not changed. Even

when it comes to Deepfake, which is a technology that is almost fully digital, the fact that skin colour is still a filter makes absolutely no sense. In the past you could argue that the emulsion reacts in a certain way to skin colour due to how light manifests – but now it's a digital filter! There is absolutely no reason for this except for racist bias. So as long as it remains this way, it becomes very difficult to achieve any other sort of representation. Unless refugees manage to start representing themselves, things are not going to change. And you see with Black Lives Matter that there is a slow shift. You can now finally watch mainstream series in which inter-racial relations are a given, and homosexuality or gender fluidity are not issues anymore: we are just bodies. But when it comes to people with no rights, so-called illegal people, people with no papers, they are not even citizens. Unless they start to be able to represent themselves, I do not foresee change. The ghosts cannot haunt. And a ghost that doesn't haunt is not perceived.

Korporaal: Some of your earlier work also looks at the ways cities or nations represent themselves, confronting these notions with actual CCTV imagery from those places. On the one hand the border is very important for this, and on the other hand it is made invisible. We think of a nation as having borders, but we don't represent the violence that happens at these borders. I think it is interesting that you are playing with this by bringing elements from the outside inside, and these elements that if we were just walking around NDSM (where Nieuw Dakota is located) would look like innocent objects on a construction site now become elements that are connected to policing and feelings of insecurity.

Albuquerque: Some people came in and said that it felt like being at a checkpoint somewhere. You identify the site with destruction but also with construction, and interestingly enough we are still talking about the same materials. The installation with the metal and wooden pieces together with the drone training imagery, *Operative Distance*, had a similar aim. The sculptures were not exactly buildings, but compiling building materials, allowing a movement between these possibilities: construction, destruction, and reconstruction. The focus is on the rearticulation of the components that are already there. It was similar upstairs with the multi-screen installation *The Symbol of the Thing Itself*, which used Deepfake technology and showed three actresses [with ties to Brazil, São Tomé e Príncipe, and Cabo Verde] reading a sixteenth century poem heralding the Portuguese colonial expansion. I'm inviting a re-reading of these famous poets that still occupy such a central place in the building of national identities. I covered the floor with soil, fertile

ground, that smelled very strongly and symbolised a new beginning. So, I am constantly inviting the possibility of healing and a rearticulation of these components [construction, destruction and reconstruction]. Because we are here, we are a result of all this history. How can we reconfigure it? How can we first heal together, and then find out where we can go from here?

Korporaal: Healing is definitely a word that came to mind as I was watching that work. Also, talking about these filters that are used in Deepfake and other technologies, as I was listening to the poem's story, I was thinking about the way its references to myth also act as a kind of filter. Somehow, by describing the indigenous women as nymphs, as mythical creatures, it becomes a story of consensual erotic adventure, instead of allowing the people to have an individual voice or image. And that's something that still happens – we layer these stories on top of records of colonialism and rape, without showing what is actually happening.

Albuquerque: Exactly. This poem, to my knowledge, has never been challenged. I just thought, I need to do it right now. There is a whole personal story behind it, of how I came to it. My naivety kept me from understanding this poem until I re-read it and questioned it, just a few years ago. Because this poem is studied at school by ten-year-olds. It's a book you read at a very young age, and that stays with you as a poem that pays tribute to the 'discoveries', which are not discoveries, let's say, the expansion. Having it read by these women created a very powerful moment, because they had also read it as kids, as it's still read in the ex-colonies of Portugal. They had to read the text in preparation for themselves, because the language is almost impossible to understand, but we filmed them reading out loud without rehearsing. In the process of recording this together, we were constantly arriving at other conclusions. Asking: what are they really saying here? Who is this person, what is happening here? When men are compared to dogs, it's so violent. And it is still read, there are frequent events featuring these poems. It's written everywhere. And it's incredibly racist. You could say, 'those were other times', but yes, shall we then re-read it under the light of our times? And if we teach it at school, what is the perspective from which we're doing this? I really like that you establish the parallel with the filters of the mythical, in order to allow us to perceive these realities as less violent. Which in the case of technology comes with the excuse that this is why the features of people of colour are less defined in images, 'this is how technology works'. This excuse has always been there, 'that's how photography has been doing it since the beginning'. Technology as a myth.

Fig. 2: The Symbol of the Thing in the Thing Itself.

Korporaal: When watching the work, it seems like both of these processes are visible at the same time. On the one hand, the Deepfake is failing as the facial recognition technology falters and finds it impossible to compare and overlay faces with different skin tones. On the other hand, there is the faltering that comes with the recognition of what is happening in the poem that the three women are reading. And somehow that makes visible all the gaps in the technology and the language. It feels like this is what creates the space that allows for healing. When the women are reading, responding, and coming into conversation with each other through the impossibility of seeing or taking over the other's perspective completely.

Albuquerque: For me, it was definitely really important to unfold myself by working with these women, whom I very much respect for their work. They have a similar history to mine, but also extremely different, because we come from three different continents. It goes so far back in time that it's not questioned or problematised, which makes it almost intangible. Through art – although I am still the director, this work is very collaborative – we all did become aware of our positioning. All of us have a connection to Holland, so the situatedness here was very important as well. Of course, not all these aspects need to be explained by the work, but that was the departure point. What happens to 500 years of history being inscribed in a single body, in Holland, at this particular moment in time. Because everything you do is affected by how you look, how you speak, and the chances you have had in

your life. How do you find work, how do you get a venue to perform in – with the marks of history that you carry with you? That filter is always there.

Korporaal: This poem is about Portuguese history, but this is also everyone's history, everyone is touched by colonialism. Did you feel the Dutch audience recognised that?

Albuquerque: In general, older straight white men were less interested in this particular work. It was maybe too aggressive. Women were very touched, they were very interested, and those with colonised pasts absolutely connected. For people from Indonesia, I heard it was like reading a similar book, including a recognition of the wallpaper made from the blown up, enlarged illustrations. They told me that these are the illustrations in their books as well, of naked nymphs being pursued by fully-dressed conquistadors. And younger people were definitely very interested. In a way, I think it also helped them to understand their own past and historical context, as well as that of so many people they know.

Fig. 3: The Symbol of the Thing in the Thing Itself, wallpaper.

Korporaal: Thinking again of myth, gender, and the act of looking, there is also the myth of Medusa, which is referenced so often, which connects the power of the gaze to the idea of the evil, monstrous woman. But if we go back to the myth, Medusa was actually punished for being raped.

Albuquerque: It's an infuriating myth and perspective! But the women who read the poem, their past, even if ancient, is also coming from rape.

Korporaal: It is a combination of colonialism and patriarchy.

Albuquerque: Yes, and that is why so many people found the work disturbing, because it exposes present-day patriarchy and how certain realities are never questioned. It became a very hypnotic room, where people stayed and stayed, picked up the books outside the door and then went in again. It was also uncanny. Some people found it funny in an unsettling way.

Korporaal: Would they show this work in Portugal?

Albuquerque: I have no idea. I think depending on who you would work with. But I think the response would be quite uncomfortable. I am ready for it though, of course.

Korporaal: A work like yours, which is a kind of collective reading, can be so powerful through its intimacy. Whereas so many projects claim to be participatory in a spectacular way, but don't necessarily have the same effect.

Albuquerque: Yes, with participation there is the possibility to hear multiple voices. But just hearing doesn't mean that there will be a positive outcome. You need to engage.

Korporaal: My research looks at decolonial transcultural collaborations in moving image work. It also questions what it means to give a camera to someone and ask them to represent themselves if that technology has built-in biases.

Albuquerque: Jonathan Beller wrote the book *The Message is Murder*, in which he argues that the programming language, already on a modulating level, is so incredibly biased that anything you do with it already contains that violence. Flavia Dzodan's work also highlights this aspect in AI. So, it's not just about giving people a camera, you need other programmers, other races and genders where it actually counts. Not on the consumer end, but on the creative end. That's where diversity needs to be. The thing with programming languages is that they really are languages. You can write code in a poetic way. Even using the same code, the way you modulate it can be artistic, or it can become aggressive speech. If you don't have people other than Incels articulating this code in new ways, and creating new code, then the bias will always be there.

Korporaal: Is that something that is also integrated into your next project?

Albuquerque: I am now looking into exhaustion and burnout as capital assets, and how certain modes of resistance to this can come from communities that have dealt with burnout for many centuries. The whole history of colonialism is one huge cataclysm, so I am researching how resistance can

emerge from these exhausted communities, where supposedly there is no more creative energy. Burnout is a condition of contemporary labour, and we just go through masses of people in order to create capital. But how can this also be the origin of more creative approaches to living together and producing grassroots movements? And obviously, digital technology is part of it, talking about sonic warfare and how it is to live with PTSD. What does that do to the body? Surveillance is here not the core, for once, but a satellite to the project.

Paula Albuquerque's solo show Enter the Ghost: Haunted Media Ecologies at Nieuw Dakota Amsterdam was exhibited from 25 October through 29 November 2020.

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