

frieze

Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal
By Christy Lange, January 2014



Raphaël Dallaporta, *KAFIR QALA. Citadel. Balkh Province, Afghanistan*, 2011, from the series 'Ruins', c-type print on Dibond, 1.5 x 1.2 m

The title for this year's Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, a bi-annual festival of photography exhibitions throughout the city, was 'Drone: The Automated Image'. It reflected a slight confusion between a drone and the visual technology with which it's equipped. This year's guest curator, Paul Wombell, in his introduction, suggests that 'drones are the robots of seeing'. Though they carry technology for making automated imagery, drones are not necessarily analogous to cameras. Semantics aside, it is hard to think of a timelier theme than automated visual surveillance, and this series of shows managed to expand the theme beyond the narrow scope suggested by its title.

The month-long programme comprised two group shows at Fonderie Darling and VOX, centre de L'Image Contemporaine, and multiple solo or two-person exhibitions at non-profit spaces, museums and commercial galleries. The most useful touchstones for the show were three presentations in galleries in the communal arts building at 372, rue de Sainte-Catherine O. Here, solo shows by Raphaël Dallaporta and Trevor Paglen (at Centre des arts actuels Skol and

SBC Galerie d'art Contemporain, respectively) hewed most closely to actual drone imagery, by showing photographs or video produced by unmanned aerial vehicles. For his series of mosaic images of overlapping photographs 'Ruins' (2011), Dallaporta built a homemade drone to help French archaeologists survey the landmarks of Afghanistan (including the path of Alexander the Great's journey, sites destroyed by the Mongols in the 13th century and areas threatened by destruction in the current ongoing conflict). In Dallaporta's video *Checkpoint Tanguï* (2012), pixelated footage filmed by his drone's camera shows the vehicle lifting off and gaining in altitude as the landscape below comes into wider and more expansive view. But the footage is disorientating rather than orientating – it occasionally comes into focus but never remains steady. The drone, and therefore our view, is subject to elements like the buffering of wind and the skill of the pilot. We see fragmented views of the arid landscape, in which the few cars that appear inevitably look like tiny moving targets. The use of the amateur drone for archaeological purpose strikes a stark contrast with Paglen's presentation, which included a rarely seen video *Drone Vision* (2010), comprising a short clip of footage from the camera of a US military drone, appropriated by a satellite hacker. The image quality on the drone sensor's video is not even as good as Dallaporta's homemade machine. But the cars, which traverse the same landscape, still look like targets – and as the drone's camera zooms in on them, we realize they might be.

At Galerie B-312, a presentation of Cheryl Sourkes's work engaged with the camera without a photographer, and the ability for our own digital technology to film ourselves. In *Everybody's Autobiography* (2012), a single mouse on a plinth allows you to click on hundreds of projected thumbnails to enlarge a sequence of a few screen grabs from personal webcams. Private settings become public and accessible in an aggregation of voyeuristic possibilities. In the same gallery, Véronique Ducharme's slide projection *Encounters* (2012–13) showed images of animals captured by hunting cameras triggered by heat and movement. Together the two installations presented humans and animals caught in 'private' moments made visible through unmanned cameras. Both artists render their subjects unaware and vulnerable, a combination that alluded to larger issues of privacy and surveillance.

The group show at Darling Foundry dealt more with accidental, personal or vernacular kinds of surveillance, rather than drones per se. Here, the standout work was Jules Spinatsch's panoramic photographic installation picturing the Vienna Opera Ball (*Surveillance Panorama Project No. 4: Vienna MMIX 10008/7000, Speculative Portrait of a Society*, 2009–11). To capture the sprawling, opulent scene,

Spinatsch used two computer-controlled cameras and created a mosaic of 10,000 images taken over eight hours. The installation raises questions about whether these attendees, parading their own wealth while taking part in a voyeuristic spectacle, knew they were being watched, and whether they would want to be displayed here in this vast, automatically generated panorama.

At the McCord Museum, a pairing of Mishka Henner's *Dutch Landscapes* (2011) with images from the Montreal Aerial Survey in the museum's archive illustrated how surveillance is used to map territories and trace urban development. The archive features glass plates of aerial views of the city, commissioned by City of Montreal during the 1960s and '70s to make maps – a precursor to Google Earth that produced imagery not unlike the kind taken by Paglen's and Dallaporta's drones. Henner's images of aerial views of the Netherlands are also about land use. In them we see how the Dutch government chooses to use stylized, abstract shapes to hide particular sites (such as royal palaces and army barracks) from Google Earth views. The juxtaposition fittingly revealed how even the most advanced technology in automated imagery creates an 'overview' that is nevertheless fragmented, incomplete and unsatisfactory.