DISCOURSES IN DISANTHRO STUDIES

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by

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INTRODUCTION

The culture of capitalism has existed for the majority of human history. Resource wars, territorial enforcement and technological disparity go back as far as the Stone Age. Even the early Human's trek from their homelands searching for new resources in a changing climate could be seen as being aided by technologies such as clothing, tools and storage of food and water. It is my belief that the creation of agricultural instruments and deadlier weapons in the early stages of human civilization and nation building is where the foundations lay of the cyclical relationships found in the artificial constructs of economy. Supply and demand, surplus and shortage along with their militaristic counterparts gave way to populations controlling one another through a complex web of psychological, economic and martial tactics. What is in question here is the concept of anthropocentrism, or the idea that humanity holds a higher moral ground compared to the rest of the natural universe and so then has the right to claim anything as it's own. "Many traditional western ethical perspectives are anthropocentric or human-centered in that they assign intrinsic value to human beings alone."1 This way of thinking has been used to justify all varieties of exploitation and violence throughout time.

The devastation that characterizes the Anthropocene is not simply the result of activities undertaken by the species Homo sapiens; instead, these effects derive from a particular nexus of epistemic, technological, social, and political economic coalescence figured in the contemporary reality of capitalism. 2

I would argue that anthropocentrism then, could be considered as a primary driving force behind capitalistic intentions. Only in recent history has this force proven to be a danger for the planet and all that inhabits it with things like the excessive testing of nuclear weapons,

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the proliferation of plastics, and the global combustion energy market. Now the world bears
the mark of humans in the land, air and sea. As humans endeavor to create new life separate
from evolution and natural selection there is little room for error, digital autonomy presents
many opportunities for humanity to progress and learn however there are dangers as well.
These dangers come from profitable intentions and the desire to survey and control, where
new technologies benefit only the few that oversee them.

In an age where semi autonomous systems are patrolling the skies and algorithms
control stock markets and even guide dating, it appears as if the metaphorical ‘hand on the
wheel’ is slowly being passed to human-kind’s digital progeny. This age of acceleration and
human geologic reckoning has been colloquially termed the ‘Anthropocene’ by those studying
contemporaneity.3 “Time is central to the Anthropocene, for it forces evolutionary and
geological considerations into Western thought.”4 Though not yet formally recognized by the
scientific community as a truly new and unique epoch in time, one standing equally to phases
like the Jurassic or Pleistocene, the Anthropocene is a subject of great discussion among
scientists, epistemologists, artists, philosophers and many others.

With this exhibition Rehabilitation Center (fig 1) and corresponding contextual research,
another voice joins the discourse. Proposed is an alternative reality within the context of the
Anthropocene. One where there are no dark corners for closed-door decision making, where
intrigue and play can heal the scars of deception and greed, where divisional rhetoric cannot
withstand compassion and togetherness.

The culture of capitalism and its militaristic actualities play crucial roles in the design
language of the Rehabilitation Center body of work, where both nostalgic and contemporary
allusion is utilized to connect the past, present and future realities we inhabit. The sleek and

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3 Davis, Heather and Etienne Turpin, editors. Arts in the Anthropocene, London, 2015. 3-4
4 Davis, Heather and Etienne Turpin, editors. Arts in the Anthropocene, London, 2015. 4
modern delta-winged forms of next generation pilot-less military aircraft serve as graphic placeholders for concepts like border enforcement, resource wars, surveillance and technological disparity while being characterized through interactions with their environments to extract an unconventional solvent to dissolve their contemporary context. A new ‘Disanthro’ way of thinking inhabits this alternative reality and challenges the establishment of the ‘Just War Tradition’ which provides allowance for the quantification of casualties and gives incentive to permit total martial dominance in the name of security. While many of these new technologies are initially developed for black budget military programs, they do eventually seep through into the civilian sector, where then a new explosion of possibilities abound.

As autonomous systems become more reliable and diverse, their potential uses grow exponentially. So does the responsibility when using such systems, as descried in an article on NATO's website discussing drones. “The technologies create some moral accountability gaps. When autonomous military systems are deployed, it becomes less clear how to apportion responsibility.” Complication and contradiction are omnipresent themes found at the core of Anthropocene discourse, and in order to more fully understand the gravity of the world we inhabit some historical context must be explored. Specific to this discussion then, are the philosophical implications of surveillance, war and consumption; the decision making of the few adjusting the course of the many over time; and the endless possibilities of autonomy that lie on the horizon.

BIRDS AND THE BEADS

Quantification and numeracy provide a rationale to justify actions based on data points, whether real or imagined, so that the observer may be removed or separated from that which they are attempting to measure. Numbers, scales and artificial forms of measurement make it possible to manipulate the context in which a certain instance of reality is being recognized. It also provides allowance for certain quantifiable destructions that may occur as a result of the actions being taken. Davis and Turpin describe numeracy in the context of the Anthropocene as “the seemingly endless flow of numbers within the hyper-mediated spectacle of terminal capitalism: 400 PPM of atmospheric CO2. Seven billion people.”

*Birds and the Beads* (fig 2) takes a look at the nature of quantification, and where it comes from at a universal level while giving a comical nod of the head to human nature.

The abacus has historically been a tool for visualizing and working with numbers for thousands of years, aiding science and trade. It has been a symbol of Arabic mathematics and science, and in this work provides allusion to the quantification of people and resources in that part of the world. Now in the age of digitization the abacus is an antiquated form however it has found a new purpose as a child’s toy to promote early thoughts of numeracy. Brightly colored plastic toys with sliding beads can be found in nearly any place children go to play. The element of play is central to this piece as it sets the tone for interaction between the bird and the abacus. As Johan Huizinga described in his book, Homo Ludens, “In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action.”

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In *Birds and the Beads* a cozy and comfortable environment is set with a scale Persian rug, one that could be found on a grandmother’s living room floor. The rug, like the abacus, again brings connotations of the Middle East into the mix. The bird sits comfortably on the rug entranced in numerical playtime. The beads go back and forth while conjuring thoughts of god-like power and control, meanwhile the bird has become enchanted by the beads with their delusions of wealth. Its obsession left it permanently grounded having never learnt to fly after becoming sedentary and bulbous. The bird, which takes the silhouette of a Northrop Grumman X 47-B (fig 3), has a fuzzy nonthreatening flocked coat and has been CNC milled with the subtle texture of its intentions of wealth encoded in binary, the language of its full scale semi-autonomous counterpart (fig 4). The beads of the abacus are made of blue glass resembling the reflectivity of the oceans, with the center bead a 3D printed globe made to resemble aged metal and precious stone (fig 5). The pillars of the abacus resemble the classical columns of the West that are so often found on the facades of economic and governmental institutions. Traditional and modern production methods and materials are blended in the construction. The globe beads are 3D printed yet carefully painted by hand while the glass beads are individually sculpted in a flame. The pillars are CNC routed and engraved out of high density polyethylene sheet then blasted with sand to force age onto the resilient material that makes up a large percentage of the waste in the oceans. Purchased in raw sheet form, this HDPE material is used throughout the work. Highlighting its inherent beauty and usefulness can lead to a different perspective on what is willing to be thrown out and forgotten. The multiplicity of the Earth shaped beads references how it can appear that the petrochemical industry is playing with the Earth’s resources as if we have a selection of other planets to use up as well.
The oil industry marches in step with the military industrial complex, so thus resource control and acquisition is paramount to the modern war economy. As Amy Myers Jaffe and Jareer Ellass explain in their article on war and oil for the Columbia Journal of International Affairs “Military adventurism, proxy wars and regional pathologies in the Middle East expand and contract with the ebb and flow of massive petrodollar accumulations related to the oil price cycle.”8 The reality of these cycles and relationships is expresses through the way that the objects interact with each other, regardless of the perception as to the nature of the interaction, they are together nonetheless.

This is where the form of the bird takes a more direct relationship with the forms of the beads. The bird, being in the shape of a drone, is affixed on the land and sea it watches over, while being dependent on the resources below to continue operations. Meanwhile it sits comfortably on the rug disconnected from the world, not that much unlike a drone pilot with a joystick choosing life or death for individuals thousands of miles away.

SUBURBAN STRUT

Things in the sky have always drawn a peculiar fascination with humans. Stars in the night's sky, birds flying, comets and meteorites; all these things inspired wonder and curiosity, but often too a humbling sense of fear. Throughout time people have undoubtedly looked up in the sky to see things flying and moving about which cannot be easily explained. This phenomenon has been given the contemporary general term UFO, or unidentified flying object. Regardless of the true nature of the object in the sky, if it cannot be identified as a known civilian or military craft, then it remains an unknown object, inspiring intrigue and the same humbling fear felt by early humans looking up at a comet. In the piece Suburban Strut

(fig 6), this mixture of wonder, intrigue and fear of the unknown, coalesces with the mundane realities of suburbia. The large silhouette frame, that of an RQ-170 Sentinel (Fig 7) surveillance drone commonly known as the ‘Beast of Kandahar’, floats effortlessly on its balance point above a green grass lawn with a white picket fence. Lighting from underneath and above cast a pinkish glow on the translucent white HDPE, creating an ominous shadow that falls on the ground below representing the panopticonic nature of aerial surveillance (fig 8). The epitome of suburban consumption and home building, the flamboyant pink flamingo, is the form taken by the drone once it has been illuminated with pink light. Supporting the ‘flamingo’ are steel rebars welded to a point, these rebars could be thought of as the physical reality of Suburban Strut, with rebar being a commonly used structural material when building. However there is another reality to the name as well, as the giant flamingo in relation to the scale fence and grass appears to be walking, or strutting across the landscape. The relations of scale are important to this piece because the contrasting size of the flamingo and it’s precision industrially styled construction seem to loom far above the possibilities of the white picket fence and lawn below.

Such as the chariots and iron swords of ancient times, technological gaps have been a means of exercising power over others. In an article by James A. Paul for the Global Policy Forum he states that during WWI “Strategists for all the major powers increasingly perceived oil as a key military asset, due to the adoption of oil-powered naval ships, new horseless army vehicles such as trucks and tanks, and even military airplanes.”9 During and after the Great War allied powers, especially the British, realized the dominance that aerial surveillance could bring. In an article about air power in the middle east during WWI a CNN writer said, “Officials

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who guided the military effort in the region saw it as a land of mystery impervious to ordinary observation. Surveillance aircraft seemed to promise vision beyond the mirages, sandstorms, and distances that made it unmappable in their estimation.”¹⁰ The technological distance between the operators of these aircraft and those who are being surveyed is apparent, however the nature of surveillance comes down to curiosity and intrigue as well as an exercise of power.

That curiosity of what one is truly seeing is at the core of this piece, as there is an ironic bit of historical context that illustrates this. In the mid to late 80’s in the Hudson Valley area of New York, there were supposedly thousands of sightings of black triangles in the sky. They were lit up like Christmas trees and had been seen flying over the area in different iterations and designs over the years. However when comparing the silhouettes of the crafts spotted, dubbed the Hudson Valley Boomerang (fig 9), and that of the RQ 170 Sentinel drone (fig 7), the similarity is striking. Could it be that whatever those thousands of people saw was some sort of prototype being tested in plain sight, not an alien craft or swamp gas? It is a common belief that the military has a history of covering up black budget testing in plain sight, and then brushing off the sightings as crazy talk. Due to the secretive nature of such projects, there is no way to find the truth when it has been purposefully buried. Looking through reports of sightings throughout recent history one can find that most of the shapes seen in the sky coincide with actual military prototypes. In most cases, what people see as UFOs are truly UAVs or unmanned aerial vehicles. It is hard to consider that these intriguing objects in the sky are indeed man made because of the technological gap between civilian and military infrastructures, making it difficult to understand what is actually possible with our current technology.

ALL TOGETHER NOW!

Territorial borders exist amongst nearly all kinds of life forms. Scent and other subtle forms of marking denote boundaries for most creatures. Humans are among the few that build complex infrastructures to enforce borders. Some of these can even be seen from space, like the Great Wall. All, however, eventually succumb to time, erosion and change. The walling off of a landscape is a physical as well as symbolic gesture, the ultimate physical incarnation of an ‘us versus them’ ideology. In recent times the most dramatic iteration of this story played out in the relatively short life of the Berlin Wall. Cracks began to appear as the wall itself became a symbol of oppression, eventually leading to its obsolescence and being taken down signaling the end of the Cold War. The act of breaking through the thick vandalized layers of concrete and rebar is an inevitability of all divisional infrastructures (fig 10). This leads once artificially divided peoples to the reality of new found togetherness. Any artificial constructs of division will eventually change and evaporate leaving a distillation of oneness through experience and mortality. It is my belief that unity is a natural force, one keeping at bay and restoring the damage of artificial division. This is illustrated in the installation All Together Now! (fig 11) with broken and vandalized concrete inhabited by golden birds gathered together in the rubble of the old. The concrete infrastructure is cast with steel reinforcement in the shape of drones, alluding to the reality of digital eyes and ears replacing brick and mortar as the standard means of enforcing borders and territorial order (fig 12). The concrete bares the marks of ‘vandalism’, just as the Berlin Wall was painted to diminish it’s symbolic strength and graffitied as a public display of non compliance and resistance. Broken and crumbled, with steel exposed, the mangled heap of former oppression lays fallen. Unrecognizably transformed under the feet of the birds who still bear the marks of their experiences and backgrounds despite their new found togetherness (fig 13). The birds are 3D printed with
textures on their backs resembling suburban streets, the topographic lines of open pit mines and dollar signs, the symbol of American wealth (fig 14). Despite their origins, they have come together to rejoice in the end of separation. The sleek and faceted gold appearance of the birds contrasts starkly with the crumbling dirty nature of the fallen wall. Scale once again plays an important role as the concrete towers above the birds on the ground like monolithic ruins from ancient times. The existence of the wall cannot be undone, yet in its ruining there is acceptance with what has happened so that life can move on. The old and the new inhabit the same space, trying to achieve balance, while paying respects to the past and where it has led to.

FEEDING THE BIRDS

Natural interactions between lifeforms are ever evolving in this world of rapid technological development. In this performance video piece, Feeding the Birds (fig 15), the elements of time and nature are intertwined with compassion. In the short 7 minute film the 'Disanthro' character, played by myself, sits patiently on a park bench as he throws bird seed out to the 'birds' in front of him. These birds take the forms of the drones mentioned above, and stand attentively on steel legs waiting to be fed. The one feeding the birds recedes into the natural background clad in camouflage. Wearing a mask he is anonymous. He is everyone and no one, his disheveled hair blowing in the wind (fig 16). The feeder of the birds has become another part of the natural landscape. As the film progresses and the 'Disanthro' character spreads more seed, one can hear a growing din of starlings in the background as they descend upon the trees waiting for their turn at the seed after the drone 'birds' have finished their meal. The film plays on repeat through the curved glass screen of a 1st generation blue and white Apple iMac. The process of converting the film to a format readable by the 18 year old computer was an exercise in technological nostalgia, with legacy file
formats and slow response times. The computer itself is also a sort of nostalgic performance, like a classic car show, as it is astounding that a computer of that age could run continually without interruption for days on end. The subtle sounds of its fans whirring and the cathode ray tube monitor buzzing along with the waxing and waning of the bird sounds in the film add the element of sound into the equation of the entire installation. When one walks into the gallery they are immediately met with the sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing, making the space feel natural and inviting.

**REHABILITATION CENTER**

Compassion for all things is the antithesis of nearly all the negative behaviors discussed above. With compassion it is difficult to divide peoples, deceive and spy on them, commit war, and destroy them. The restorative nature of compassion is conveyed in the piece Rehabilitation Center (fig 17) where drones are symbolically cared for and nurtured as if they were their own life forms. In the piece they are fed seed and water, while ironically 'defecating' on a bedding of shredded cash, their former sustenance (fig 18). In this 'disanthro' alternative reality the birds are not as pets or curiosities, rather they are kept safe until fit to be returned to the wild. They are treated as having a will of their own, but still requiring our help to become whole again. By eliminating their marital context, the forms of the drones with their industrial construction and rusted steel legs, take new life. They are beings to be nursed back to a healthy state before being released into the environment, with boundless possibilities for existence (fig 20).

The recurrence of the brown and yellow paint schemes most often found in national parks and forests create a setting where all seems familiar while existing in an alternative reality. The hand done type setting on the sign references the design of park signs from the space race era. The plaque at the bottom of the enclosure is milled in the style of a nature
center, with tactile and brightly colored shapes corresponding to each of the bird ‘species’ to their real life warring counterparts (fig 19). Only the names [X45 B (fig 3), X47 (fig 21), RQ170 (fig 7) and nEUROn (fig 22)], manufacturers, and operators of the aircraft are given so as to not empower their realities with quantifications and data sets.

Aerial systems can be used to survey animal migrations, observe climate trends, aid in search and rescue and provide a platform for wireless networks. Semi-autonomous and eventually autonomous systems can be employed everywhere, not just in the sky. An excellent example of these types of systems being deployed in the name of compassion is the Center for Robot-Assisted Search and Rescue, or CRASAR, headed by Dr. Robin Murphy at Texas A&M University. They are a humanitarian organization that deploys their services worldwide free of charge, helping in disaster efforts along with search and rescue. “The intent is to do good while helping show the value of robots to speed adoption and to gather valuable field data to make all robotic systems better.”

As organizations like this grow and the industry develops, perhaps there will be a shift in how autonomy is utilized. Rather than militaristic endeavors of dominance and control being the driving force behind technological innovation, compassion and discovery can overcome all obstacles in an era of rapid change.

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CONCLUSION

All new technologies pose questions of how they will be used and who will benefit from them. When metals were discovered and their manipulation understood, the warrior benefited from sharper more resilient materials, but so did the farmer from more efficient tools. As the age of the Anthropocene continues on, digital autonomous creatures will be another new technology with omnipresent consequences for all living beings. To see these new technologies as creatures like ourselves can illuminate new possibilities and ways of thinking.

This shifted perspective away from anthropocentrism is becoming more prevalent in the thought processes and studio practices of individuals in the creative community and beyond. For example, the collective artist work “Dear Climate” is a similar endeavor which intends to add a new voice to the conversation over climate change. It does so in a manner described by Davis and Turpin as “a training program for the spirit and the imagination, using a tone, aesthetic, and vocabulary that's the opposite of the prevailing ones.”¹² “Dear Climate” is an ongoing work that includes posters, writings and audio employing a similar 'disanthro' mindset as discussed in this work. Tom Sachs is another prevalent artist that is working with alternative realities and narrative pieces. He creates spaces with objects that are used for ritual performances that exist within the alternative reality he develops. ¹³The creation of alternative and opposite realities within art is often used as a way to make commentary on reality, while proposing new alternatives and possibilities.

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¹³ “Biography” Tom Sachs. https://www.tomsachs.org/biography
Rehabilitation Center and its corresponding thesis explores the sources of damaging and oppressive behavior while investigating the technological infrastructure used for the implementation of such behaviors. The disparity between these technologies and the ones who are affected is expressed in the contrasting aesthetics of the hand built and the machined or printed. New possibilities are presented in the way that the forms of drones are given life and intention within their environments, dissolving the contextual reality of their currently deadly nature.

Autonomous systems and artificial intelligence have the potential to become quite dangerous if left unchecked by anthropocentric intentions. However, if they can be seen as living rocks with electrons and gold and silica in place of our iron rich blood and oxygen, perhaps there can be a more enlightened path forged ahead with the guidance and fellowship of the creatures we have made in our search for answers through the loneliness of space.
Figure 1
Rehabilitation Center installation
Figure 2

*Birds and the Beads*

HDPE, 3D prints, Glass, Wood, Carpet
Figure 3
Northrop Grumman X-47B
By US Navy - commons file, Public Domain,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=62390115
Accessed Nov, 2017
Figure 4

*Birds and the Beads* Top
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*Birds and the Beads* abacus closeup
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Suburban Strut
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Lockheed Martin RQ-170 Sentinel
Accessed Nov, 2017
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http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread1101879/pg1
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All Together Now!

Cast Concrete, Spray Paint, Steel, 3D Prints
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_All Together Now_ closeup of concrete
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*All Together Now Top down*
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*All Together Now* detail of bird
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*Feeding the Birds* installation

Video Performance, 1999 iMac
Figure 16

*Feeding the Birds* still frame
Figure 17
Rehabilitation Center installation
HDPE, Wood, Hardware Cloth, Vinyl Roofing, Paint, Bird Food Containers, Shredded Cash
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Rehabilitation Center
bird with food trays and cash bedding
Figure 19

Rehabilitation Center

View of didactic plaque
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Rehabilitation Center

closeup of birds
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Boeing X-45C
Public Domain
https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=741998
Accessed Nov, 2017
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http://www.defens-aero.com/2017/10/
drone-neuron-termine-nouvelle-campagne-essais-vol.html
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