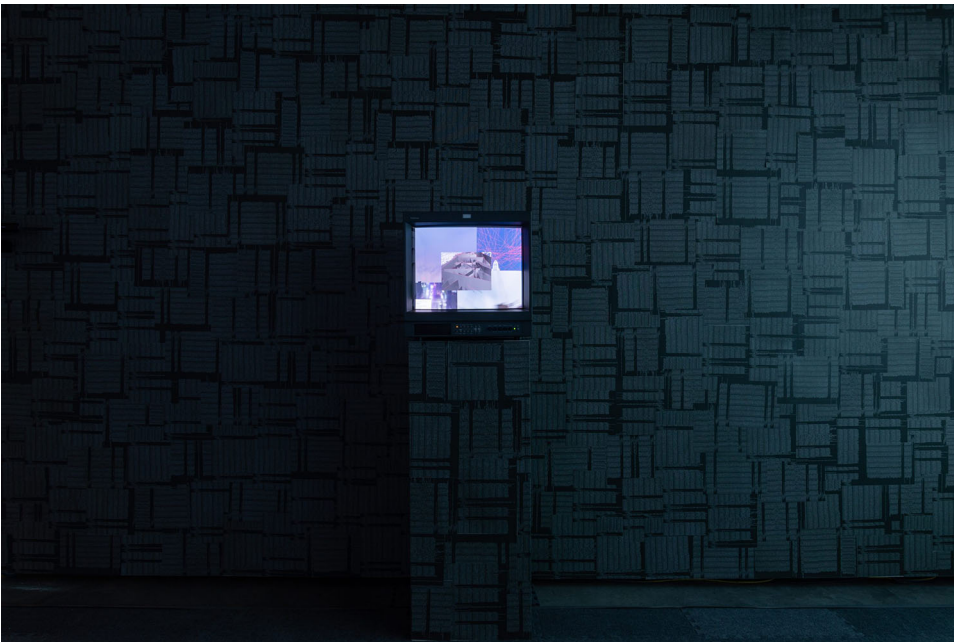


LA BIRDWATCHERS

## State Eyes in LA Skies

In the project *LA BIRDWATCHERS* (2021), the artist collective LA Birdwatchers (Aljumaine Gayle, Ladan Mohamed Siad, Suzanne Kite, and Nick Shapiro) draws upon data that documents predictive policing-driven helicopter surveillance used in Los Angeles, California, to produce an immersive sound and projected data visualization. The work picks up on historical and contemporary intersections between the military industrial complex and policing. Research and technologies developed by the military and purportedly intended for foreign warfare are regularly adopted and implemented by local police forces. The impact is often felt most acutely by those living in targeted communities as they become disproportionately subject to militarized policing measures. Through practices of visualization and abrasive sonification, *LA BIRDWATCHERS* seeks to expose the algorithmic undercurrents of these technologies and their applications. In doing so, the work enables an embodying of critique and provides an opportunity for thinking through methods of resistance.



*LA Birdwatchers* video (2021) in front of wall papered with law enforcement helicopter flight trajectory data.

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This project resulted from the confluence of four separate research and artistic pathways. It began with online meetings and discussions that focused the artists' and researchers' interests on the possibilities of communicating data through sound and visual material the racialized effects of feeling confined by state eyes in the sky. Anti-blackness is a pervasive project that structures institutions globally. As this driver of structural racism continues to thrive, it is abstracted and made invisible to communities that are not affected. A core objective of this project was to use data in order to shed further light on the issue of racialized surveillance as one instance of the larger ways that police are leveraging technology to criminalize Black and other targeted communities. At the same time, alt-right groups are met with less force and a lack of utilization of the same technologies of reconnaissance and oppression.

The four of us spent the week of George Floyd's murder in May 2020 in a workshop aiming to bring together artists and scientists related to issues of environment and climate. Yearning for a more intersectional feminist way forward, our diverse experiences and desires, the execution of a Black man in the streets of Minneapolis, and the beginning of a summer of uprisings for Black life all brought us to this project.

In the nights leading up to Floyd's death, two things had been keeping Nick up at night: 1) the worry that his Carceral Ecologies lab's community-engaged research on the environmental injustices of prisons, jails, and detention centers was too far downstream in the prison-industrial complex to matter, and 2) police helicopters circling the homes of his Latinx and Black neighbors in mid-city Los Angeles. Thinking with friends about the sound pollution and carbon emissions of police helicopters was a natural way to address both issues.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department originally consisted of about one hundred California State Militia members called the Los Angeles Rangers in 1852.<sup>1</sup> The Rangers are considered the first professional police force in the Los Angeles area whose "duties included the pursuit of criminals or Indian raiders."<sup>2</sup> Suzanne traces her interest in this project to parallel histories of oppression in California: the history of policing as tools of American Indian genocide, her family's history of participation in the Indian Relocation Act, resulting in their move to Los Angeles in the twentieth century, and her interest in the use of sound to target and oppress communities in Los Angeles. Spending hours online with the other LA Birdwatchers as the protests grew in 2020, her conversations were consistently interrupted by extremely loud and stress-heightening roars of helicopters.

We focus on Los Angeles not only because LA is the helicopter policing capital of the world and because of some of our ties to the city but also because of LA's long history as a trendsetter of militarizing and technologizing policing. The techno-optimism, epic sprawl, and anti-blackness of Southern California influenced how police dreamed about

1. "Public Defence—The Los Angeles Rangers," *Los Angeles Star* 3, no. 13, August 6, 1853, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=LASTAR18530806.2.7&e=-----en-20-I-txt-txIN----->.

2. "Los Angeles Sheriff's Department Time Line: 1850–1859," Los Angeles Sheriff's Department Museum, <https://lasd.org/pdf-lasd-museum/timeline/1850%20-%201859.pdf>.



Visitors interacting with *LA Birdwatchers* video (2021); interactive graphics led by Aljumaine Gayle.

ideal forms of surveillance and control. A single helicopter was purchased by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) in 1956 to surveil traffic and perform special operations, like wilderness search and rescue. Following the Watts Rebellion in 1965, the LAPD purchased seven helicopters in 1968, outfitted with high-lumen searchlights and communications technologies advanced by the military during the Korean War effort.<sup>3</sup> This space-race era aerial surveillance program bore a fittingly astronomical acronym: ASTRO, standing for Air Support To Regular Operations. The helicopters were disproportionately (to the point of being almost exclusively) focused on predominantly Black or Mexican American neighborhoods. By 1971, the LAPD was logging over sixty-two full days of flight time per month.

As Ralph M. Nutter of the Greater Los Angeles Urban Coalition noted, “We are of the opinion that exaggerated and unnecessary use of law enforcement helicopters is causing unnecessary tension in minority areas and stimulating resentment to such an extent that there will be provocation for acts or attitudes which could cause lasting harm to the community.”<sup>4</sup> In 1970 the LAPD’s chief of police commissioned NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, located just outside LA, to use statistical methods to validate the efficacy of these helicopters in “suppressing crime.” This study utilized questionable methods that assumed increasing arrests equated to preventing crime and made no

3. Max Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles: Race, Resistance, and the Rise of the LAPD* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 55.

4. Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles*, 56.



Still from video in *LA Birdwatchers* (2021); video led by Susanne Kite.

mention of racialized police targeting.<sup>5</sup> Despite vast methodological shortcomings, it served as a foundation for expanding law enforcement helicopter surveillance across the city and the nation.

Following the death of Floyd, we noticed the utilization of law enforcement helicopters as a crowd control and intimidation tool to suppress movements for Black life in Los Angeles. We aimed to perform an analysis of law enforcement helicopter surveillance, through sound, image, and data that did not fall prey to these same extraplanetary assumptions of the half-century old NASA study that serves as a key legitimization of this use of aerial surveillance.

In *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (2009), author Steve Goodman asks, “What can be learned from the microscale of sound about its global technocultural tendencies, drifts, innovations, and black holes? What viral algorithms are at work within vibrational culture beside so-called generative music? . . . How are audio viruses deployed within a politics of frequency?”<sup>6</sup> We find that the sonification and visualization of data are necessary tools for communicating the harms and potentialities of police brutality. Art and music are our pathway to harnessing violent sonic experiences.

The central artwork in this project is an audiovisual installation. Created by Aljumain, the installation utilizes a raw depth camera, a digital projector, custom code in a virtual programming environment called TouchDesigner, and immersive sound design emanating from speakers. Entering a dark space, the audience sees large colorful, nearly psychedelic projections. As the audience members’ bodies enter the perceptual field of the camera, they are incorporated into the projections, but in a morphed, altered, and

5. Robert W. Weaver, E.P. Framan, and Jet Propulsion Laboratory (U.S.), *Effectiveness Analysis of Helicopter Patrols* (Pasadena, CA: Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology, 1970).

6. Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

abstract state. As the body moves, the sonic world is changed. Interaction with the work is intended to mimic the feeling of surveillance and sonic attack by helicopters used against targeted communities. Participants become the performers within the work while simultaneously witnessing their abstracted presence; this blurs distinctions between human decision-making and distorted computer vision.

During the protests against police violence in downtown Los Angeles, Suzanne began to film the LAPD, the LA Fire Department, the LA County Sheriff's Department, and news helicopter paths as they circled and circled and circled overhead. In the first video installation at the Illingworth Kerr Gallery in Calgary, Canada, in fall 2021, a cathode ray tube television sat on a plinth, surrounded and drowned by black wallpaper with endless numerical data streaming up the wall and into the darkness above. The installation used an old depth camera, a computer with a graphics processing unit, and custom code in order to display and process raw data in an engaging manner within the exhibition space. On the screen, four quadrants blinked into being. The materials in this film are the camera lenses, the vision from the ground as the camera swerves in circles around the viewer, gazing up onto state power as it grinds down from above. All audio, video, and data were collected over the same twenty-four-hour period. The audio stream was recorded live from the "Air to Air" traffic communiqué or communication available on the internet. The experience of this film is meant to link the many surveillance and counter-surveillance data streams (visual, sonic, and numerical). In the center of the video, a 3D reconstruction of flight paths shows walls built around protestors from the sky, endless spirals creating bull's-eyes across the map of Southern California. Future iterations of this film could expand to include updated data and the inclusion of documentary-style interrogations of the sonic and visual swirling of state power overhead.

Parallel to and in conversation with this multimedia exploration, Carceral Ecologies, Nick's lab group of approximately twenty undergraduate and graduate students at UCLA, has been conducting a geospatial analysis of twelve months of law enforcement helicopter flight trajectories in Los Angeles. The data, which was wallpapered behind the video piece in the installation, spans six months before and after the killing of Breonna Taylor and Floyd in 2020. Students in the lab, namely Michelle Servin and Kate McNerny, have been attempting to quantify the raced and classed distribution of helicopter surveillance in LA. Specifically, they have been focused on flights that occur during sleeping hours. In sonically disturbing sleep, these supposed tools for public safety can be revealed to inflict racialized harms on childhood development, workplace performance, and mental health.

The next iteration of this project was hosted in Toronto in July 2022 by Vector Festival and Interaccess. *LA BIRDWATCHERS* is not bound by the borders of LA County, but is a necessary reflection on police surveillance and brutality across North America. It is prescient to include this work in a Toronto-based arts festival. For many years there have been complaints from the Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities about the stop-and-frisk or carding measures that take place in the greater Toronto area. However, these complaints have been largely ignored and not believed to be an issue

because of the communities that are impacted. On June 15, the interim Toronto Police chief offered an apology following the review of a

119-page document, titled *Race & Identity Based Data Collection Strategy Understanding: Use of Force & Strip Searches in 2020*. . . . The report finds that black, Indigenous and racialized people were over-represented in “enforcement actions” by police. For example, although black people made up 10 per cent of Toronto’s population, they comprised 22.6 per cent of law enforcement actions such as arrests, tickets and cautions.<sup>7</sup>

As researchers and advocates based in LA’s Skid Row have incisively described, “Throughout the history of imperialism and colonization, occupying forces have used surveillance to monitor and contain populations they deem threatening, all for the purpose of maintaining their violent rule. LAPD’s use of surveillance and data-driven policing must be understood from that perspective.”<sup>8</sup> The ever-presence of these helicopters as they slap the air thousands of times per second is far from simply a project of safety and security. The feeling of confinement through abrasive audio that only yields peace when the viewer/viewed is still, as our artwork does, is just one of many ways to understand the true work of airborne state eyes in Los Angeles and beyond. ■

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LA BIRDWATCHERS, comprised of artist Suzanne Kite, technologist Ladan Mohamed Siad, designer Aljumaine Gayle, scientist Nick Shapiro, and mapper Michelle Servin, is an art-science project that aims to capture the sonic stress of aerial surveillance, its areas of concentration, and its disproportionate contributions to climate change.

7. Temitope Oriola, “The Toronto Police apology for its treatment of racialized people is meaningless without action,” *National Post*, June 20, 2022, <https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/the-toronto-police-apology-for-its-treatment-of-racialized-people-is-meaningless-without-action>.

8. Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, “Automating Banishment,” <https://automatingbanishment.org/section/o-automating-banishment-introduction>.