

WILD WORLD OF SPORTS

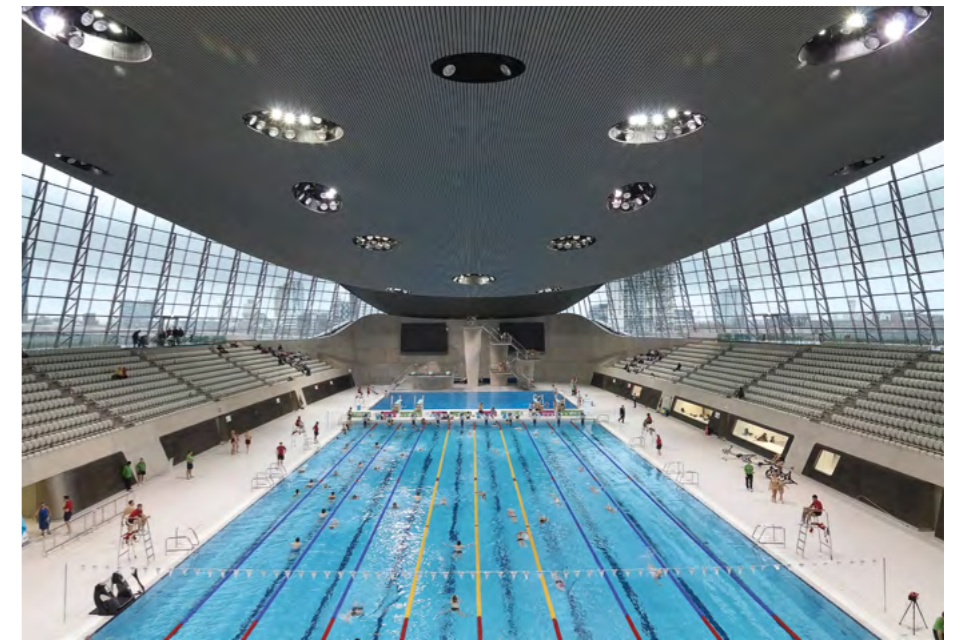
From the margins of the sporting world come five reports. No chance any of this will make the back pages. *Jaime Chu* on watching the competitors of the drone racing championships in their flip flops and slick goggles. *Ingo Niermann* details the enormous cost to life and limb of performance-enhancing substances, but finds the post-humanist potential ripe. *Bianca Heuser* honours the majesty of the horse, while *Benjamin Hirte* swims his way through the world's public pools. And back in Berlin, *Geoffrey Mak* calls in from Berghain's sportswear fetish party, where the whole club is turned into a locker room scene.

Photo: Jakob Schoof, © Bildrecht, Wien 2021

THE PUBLIC AND THE PUBLIC POOL

Benjamin Hirte

New York's summer is a long, humid stretch from May to the end of September. In the hottest weeks it can be a hell hole. One of the first things I did when I arrived in July 2018 was to register for lap swim (7–9am!) at the Lower East Side Hamilton Fish Pool. The swimming area is generous and free, like all New York City municipal outdoor pools. Most of them stem from the New Deal Era. Politicians understood early on that pools and bath houses can take some of the possible stress off of neighbourhoods in the sweltering heat. These pools, however, are only open from July through August. The public sector is desolate, despite all the big money in



Zaha Hadid Architects, London Aquatics Centre, opened in 2011

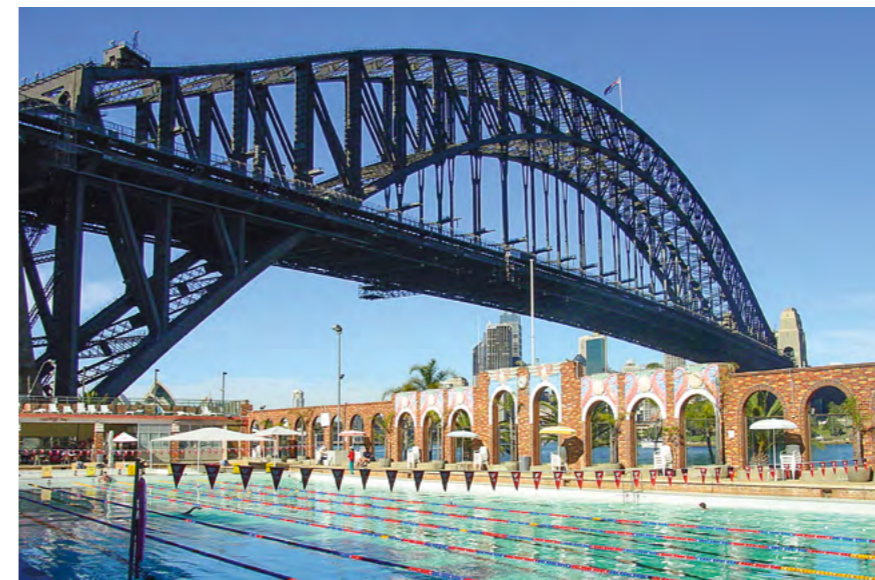
the city. This leaves municipal recreational spaces with not enough budget to finance long term regular staff.

My half an hour in the Hamilton Fish Pool every morning was a raging mass of waves and shrill blue from the pool paint. As opulent as the park area was, the water was murky and strewn with little pieces of cracked lacquer. It

was crowded with eager splashing sport swimmers, and the water level was low, basically made for non-swimmers. An epic battle. After the laps I would get changed outside, somewhere near the shower area and sit around in the shadow for a bit. This could lead to a chat. As a proper European new to the city, I felt like giving advice on how to run things better in the US. I just couldn't wrap my mind around the idea of public pools opening for only two summer months. Why not charge a couple of dollars and have it run for four or five? The answer was prompt and clear: "If you give them one dollar, next year it's going to be ten", showing a deeply rooted distrust in city government.

In the winter many artists go to the Y (the YMCA sports club) all around the city, most of them with a medium-sized pool. It's a non-profit organisation, which nowadays caters to something akin to a middle class, if that actually still exists in New York. The monthly membership fee is affordable, provided you can prove low income. The Y is therefore not luxurious, and has a long-standing charitable tradition, serves its communities, and that is its

Photo © North Sydney Council 2021



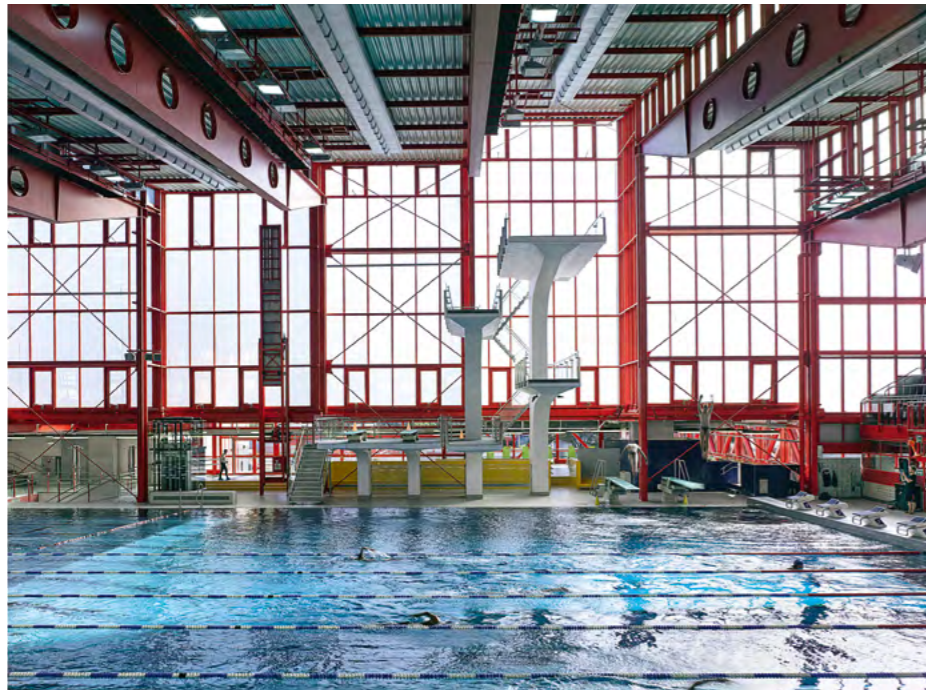
Rudder & Grout, North Sydney Olympic Pool, opened in 1936

charm. I miss my Y on 14th street. After a swim, I would often end up in the community area in one of those large leatherette chairs donning YMCA heraldic colours and read while listening to all kinds of people from the neighbourhood. There was this group of old guys who spent whole afternoons crowded around a table after their weekly basketball game, and after that, heading to the diner next door.

It is easier to understand how valuable places are that allow for some kind of diverse public after seeing such institutions in the US under constant duress. I have always taken Vienna's Social Democratic bulwarks for granted. Vienna has its own problems as a city – its nepotism, microaggressions, haunted by the spectre of its grand history – but social and public infrastructure is not yet one of them. Since 1919, the city has been governed by the Social Democratic Party, except

threat now from various public-private partnership stunts, but so far, Vienna has managed to hold on to the idea of city-owned property. Public transportation and institutions are mostly well-run and affordable. The renovated *Stadthallenbad* (municipal swimming pool) is an eerily crisp, well-maintained, freshly painted landscape with a large steel basin.

Public pools are a complex blend of personal and public space. The locker situation, the lane sharing, and the distinct corporeality of water sport create an unusual social situation, like those found in contact sports. If nothing else, there is a need for interaction that is at the base of a functioning commons. Pre-Covid, I visited a lot of public pools for swim laps while travelling. They exemplified core ideals of the respective city's civic life and its aspiration towards city development. I still get weekly updates from Pasadena's Rose



Roland Rainer, Stadthallenbad, opened in 1974, Vienna
General renovations by driendl* architects, 2010–2014

for the fascist years. Here too, social housing, cultural institutions, and, of course, public pools are under greater

Bowl pool on their futile attempts to stay open during the Covid limbo. A symbolic cul-de-sac was my trip in

London to Zaha Hadid's Aquatics Centre, lying prostrate like a dead whale in the bleak dystopian post-Olympic desert. A landscape straight out of a J.G. Ballard Novel, all watched over by Anish Kapoor's signature tower skeleton. Inside Hadid's pool, under a digitally curved dome, I found myself encased by an absurd line up of huge, colourful, plastic aircushion slide castles for children. The showers and lockers already felt slightly neglected – pointing to the slow doom, illustrating the disproportion between its creation for the bombastic short-term use for the 2012 Olympics, and the impossibility to fill those structures with an actual usage and daily visitors. After that I went to the adjacent Stratford Shopping Centre. Coming to a new city, swimming is like a side entrance to an aspect of civic life, revealing the inner workings of its immune system.

I often thought sports and arts are an odd couple, given the art world's particular fetish for the death drive, but we live in a society; and societies, just as artists, have to take care of themselves.

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THEIR MAJESTY

Bianca Heuser

Among domesticated animals, horses have to be the most majestic. Through more than five millennia of domestication, they have retained an air of nobility that most other animals qualified as pets, livestock, or beasts of burden were never granted by their human tamers and breeders. What is at the root of their almost mythological standing among other creatures of these three categories, which all apply to the horse?

If the reasons are due to their size, cows, for example, should enjoy a similar reverence, but even in Hinduism,

the holy status that cows are granted in reality is more often expressed in a desire not to use the animals for slaughter. They are revered by many more as a symbol than for their singular divinity. If the horse's dignity was derived solely

this day they are the costliest pets little girls beg their parents for all over the world. Initially, domesticated horses received their high price tag due to their myriad uses. Among the beasts of burden, they are peerless in terms of their



USEF Pony Finals, Lexington, Kentucky in the Small Pony Hunter division

from the elevated view its rider was granted on its back, why vilify donkeys to the extent we do? No, there is nothing majestic about a donkey, not even if Jesus personally rode on one. Our adoration of horses might better be compared to our love for dogs, but again: If a dog can be thoroughly ridiculed, humiliated, even, simply by putting a sweater on them, how does a horse manage to retain its dignity in spite of having to wear a crocheted, or worse still, bedazzled, fly hood?

Let's follow the money. Horses have historically been expensive and to

versatility. After their use in agricultural development, the horse's speed got the archetypal "gentle giant" paradoxically entangled in another lucrative human enterprise: war.

It seems likely to me that this is where men's fascination with the creature really kicked up, powered by the animal's perceived "loyalty until death" and the warrior's intoxicating experience of increased height and velocity. "A horse, a horse!", Shakespeare's King Richard III cried out his last words on the battlefield, "My kingdom for a horse!" Later, John Wayne rode his

movie mare Dollor, exclusively – frequently and poignantly misspelled as Dollar – into immortality as he conquered Wild West lore. And until today, rodeos make a majorly twisted spectacle of subjugating the horse. Here, too, the masculine drive to dominate lives on as the horse is tortured in order to buck in faux wildness, only for the cowboy to feign control over the clearly superior, suffering creature.

Women, while they have historically participated in the cruel rodeo sport and some, like Joan of Arc, entered the battlefield ahead of the gender curve, seem largely to have developed a more equitable relationship to horses, one sparked by a sense of personal freedom more so than the drive to conquer. In fact, the confluence of women's rights and personal freedom can be illustrated by the invention of the side-saddle. Up until the fourteenth century, European women rode astride. With the rise of feudalism and patriarchal politics, royal families began to rely on securing a male heir to their empire, and protecting the virginity of a royal bride became an affair of state. Thus, when Princess Anne of Bohemia travelled across Europe by horse to wed King Richard II in 1382, she did so using this new contraption. A mere two hundred years later, the side-saddle had become the social norm for decent women as riding astride was now derided as "unladylike" – yet another right revoked and freedom curbed by the incessant scheming of patriarchs.

While women worked around the limitations of the side-saddle, learning how to gallop and even show jump without falling off, it obviously couldn't compare to the joy of riding with either leg wrapped around these powerful creatures. Why else would it take suffragettes in the early 20th century, over five hundred years later, protesting to regain this right if its psychological effect wasn't obvious to both them and the men outlawing it?

Photo: James Morris

All images: The Plaid Horse

Today, horse riding is a mostly female sport. Surveying both the contestants and audience of present day horse shows, one will find few men: mostly if they are there, it is either as trainers or fathers. The rules and customs of both the sport and its attire are decidedly upper class (and often as girly as it gets, peep the oversized bows), as recreational access to horses has remained a privilege reserved for the rich. But regardless of their social background, young girls all over the world are obsessed with the majestic animal. Freud attributed their fascination to his catch-all theory of the female psyche, his dearly beloved notion of penis envy, but Ockham's razor (the simplest solution is usually the right one) chops it right off: In a world dead-set on keeping any sense of agency and power out of reach for girls, the horse is a powerful symbol of freedom. Holding the reins for herself gives a young



Both images:
USEF Pony Finals, Lexington, Kentucky in the Small Pony Hunter division

girl priceless confidence, and the privacy and perspective a horse's back grants its rider only adds to the pleasure. "The wind of heaven is that which blows between a horse's ears", goes a Bedouin proverb.

In their exceptional 2017 exhibition "No Man's Land" at Berlin's ACUD Gallery, Feminist Land Art Retreat (FLAR) elegantly explored the symbolic language of equestrianism through photographs, rope installations, and a video shot on a ranch outside of Berlin. "No Man's Land" could be the title of a John Wayne movie, but here it can also be read subversively as a space literally devoid of men. The eponymous video zooms in on a horse's relationship to its rider: As it lets her clean its hooves, brush its shiny fur and bushy long tail, viewers witness the dynamic between the two sentient beings from an unusual perspective, somewhere between the two of them.

In beautiful simplicity, FLAR captured the near-mythological bond between horse and human, but especially horse and *woman*. I can't think of any other animal we merge with in the same way we do with a horse when we ride. Perhaps that is what makes the horse's majesty so universally bewitching and enduring: our epigenetic knowledge of this noble animal as our loyal companion, whose beauty, strength, and temperament demands reverence and teaches us humility as it allows us to saddle up and jump on its back.

BIANCA HEUSER is a writer based in Berlin.



DRESSCODE

Geoffrey Mak

"Pervy Party, Men Only, Play Safe! | Strikter Dresscode Sneakers & Sportswear" reads the description for Berghain's raucous sex party, FC Snax United. For one weekend every November, the Berlin techno megaclub closes off its main floor, its exhibition space Halle, and its ground floor darkroom Lab.Oratory to host a gay fetish party that has only one mandate for

admission: a sportswear dress code. Varsity socks, Thai boxing shorts, football jerseys, sneakers. The works. I've been twice, came for the sex and stayed for the set design, the boxing ring, and the piss pool. As if at a fashion party, you might've thought Snax was sponsored by Adidas – ubiquitous here both for its sportswear fetish and fascist kink. A winning look: naked except for New Balance trainers and baseball caps, with phones stashed in their socks. A foot fetishist, with the slow precision of an ASMR video, removed my sneakers and

socks before licking the sweat off my feet. "Why does your sweat make my tongue numb?", he asked. Um ... I have no idea??? One image sticks out to me: While sitting down to gather my belongings for coat check, I watched two men fucking in the locker room, a facsimile of one you'd find in a typical German gym, where gay men disguise their furtive glances from those who might not return their appreciation. It's a mixture of shame and pleasure that's always some version of the original trauma: the grade school locker room, when discovering (maybe for the first time) that forbidden hum of electricity when lingering one's gaze on other classmates' bodies, even if you weren't yet sure what you wanted to do with them.

In childhood trauma, shame acts as a formative affect constitutive of identity. It delineates stigma around what one *is* (queer) as a discrete entity to be isolated, condemned. Salient strategies in 1960s queer aesthetics (camp, drag) have always exhibited a particular genius in mobilising shame into production. Take, for instance, Andy Warhol transforming self-despising downtown outcasts into superstars on screen, or Jack Smith's sublimating trash into Golden Age stage sets. Watch Smith's muse Mario Montez who, in his screen test for Warhol, is asked what it feels like to appear in his drag persona. Montez replies, "I feel I'm in another world right now, a fantasy ... like a kingdom meant to be ruled by me."

FC Snax United is a kind of pervy fantasia, inherently narcissistic, that creates a "subjectivity-generating space" (to borrow a phrase from queer studies pioneer, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) where queer group sex, as spectator sport, is affirmed by gazes that do not have to be disguised or averted, but are returned approvingly in an exhibitionistic feedback loop. "Queer scenes are the true *salons des refusés*," writes Michael Warner, "where the most heterogeneous people are brought into great intimacy by their common experience



Photo: Spyros Rennt

of being despised and rejected in a world of norms that they now recognise as false morality.”

Snax doesn't exactly banish shame, rather it makes use of it to produce a subversive theatre. Like Montez in drag, something about the party's sportswear dress code is structurally comedic (like calling a sex club an “oratory”), as sportswear parodies a normative masculinity that polices gender identity. Within the heterosexual regime, men who sleep with others of the same sex lose their place in gender, that is, of the stylisations and codes of masculine performativity. That any of these clubgoers dressed in Lonsdale and Nikes may or may not identify as men or even athletes, is beside the point. Sportswear – removed from its intended functional context and re-appropriated as fetish – exposes through excess the signifying practices that manufacture masculinity, even if the party is still “Men Only”.

My mind snags on this criterion. At the party's entrance is a sign that reads “MEN'S CLUB” with a directive, “NO PERFORMANCE”. Something about the exaggerated, gendered performance of a sportswear party might suggest a panicked insecurity of what's styled as “male”. Because sportswear drag is so visibly not the real thing, it calls into question whether there is a real thing as “male” to begin with. For nine months in 2018 I thought I was trans. It was a confusing but generative period, at the end of which I felt I needed to recommit myself to “male”, not as an ideal, but a failed project that, in its wake, has a rejuvenated capacity for possibilities and reinvention. I still do time at the gym because I like the feel of muscles padded onto my body. While I'll rarely turn down a sex party, I've largely outgrown them. At best, FC Snax United is performative of a zombie masculinity or even homonormativity, but it still makes me nostalgic for it. Sportswear posed as

masculinity is a scam, but it can still be fun. Fail, but do it in style.

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TEST GROUNDS

Ingo Niermann

Doping is as old as competitive sports. In Ancient Olympics common performance-enhancing nostrums included extracts of horsetail plants, animal hearts, and testicles, ground hooves, bread with opium, and wine. Doping pertained as unfair and uncouth but not as so effective and therefore illegal as black magic, bribery, or foul play.

With the revival of the Olympic Games in the late nineteenth century new potent drugs like strychnine, cocaine, and amphetamines came into

Photo: Mark Reis, USA, Winter Paralympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, 2018



American sit-skier, Tyler Walker. He competed for the United States at the 2018 Winter Paralympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, where he won two silver medals.

Photo © Ottobock



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play. Even though officially prohibited since the 1930s, doping was largely tolerated throughout the twentieth century. The Cold War made any interference in international sport events an extremely delicate political affair.

Since the Fall of the Iron Curtain the fight against doping became more rigorous. The list of substances and methods banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency, established in 1999, goes into the hundreds. Professional athletes are not only tested at competitions but at any time. Still, it's a game of cat and mouse. Besides bribing and cheating, new drugs and techniques are constantly being introduced to circumvent the existing prohibitions.

What is all this effort about? Different from the ancient times, the emphasis is less on doping being unfair than on it being dangerous to your body. The war on doping comes with a moral litany about professional athletes

as “clean” role models. They are supposed to exemplify what is possible with just will power and good genes.

Five years ago, I ghostwrote the memoirs of Nils Schumann, the German winner of the 800 metre Olympic gold in 2000. After his unexpected triumph Nils struggled in repeating his success. He lost years with severe injuries and when he finally gave up on his career, this coincided with personal insolvency. I worked on the book together with artist Erik Niedling, and in the process we couldn't stop wondering: Had Nils done it? In fact, he had been in contact with a dubious physician and one of his trainers had been convicted of possession of illegal substances.

Nils gave a disarming answer: He would have had probably been doping, if only he could have afforded it. At the time of his career an undetectable “therapy” was supposed to cost around 100,000 Euros per year. Due to

his series of losses and injuries Nils simply didn't have that kind of money – “and the bank won't give you a loan for it either.”

Nils wouldn't have been concerned about harmful side effects, just the opposite: “As a competitive athlete, you train and fight in the unhealthy red zone all the time and cannot avoid taking food supplements such as L-carnitine, glutamine, or creatine. These can also endanger your health. Yes, doping can even be healthy for a competitive athlete, at least relatively speaking. For those who dope have to work less hard to achieve the same results. The fact that I stumbled from one injury to the next was not due to bad luck, but due to overwork.”

Competitive athletes are under permanent medical observation. In contrast, the laity of performance enhancement lack medical advice. To increase the effectiveness of their



German track and field athlete Léon Schäfer in the T42 starting class who specialises in sprints, high jump, and long jump.

Photo © Ottobock

training, they take unregulated amounts of unverified growth hormones, testosterone, and anabolic steroids and combine them with stimulants like speed and crystal meth. Several studies show that in Germany around one fourth of all men and one tenth of all women who go to the gym dope. They risk high blood pressure, heart attack, kidney failure, impotence, and depression for better looks. Before competitions, half of the recreational long-distance runners take painkillers. Muting the warning signals of the body increases the risk of serious injury. Physical loading multiplies the dangers of any medication.

The futility and noxiousness of the War on Drugs is well known. Most Western countries are in a process of legalising or tolerating the consumption of popular drugs. But the War on Doping still goes undisputed. Crack athletes serve as the guinea pigs for radical surveillance. They give up on their right to privacy to qualify for a Truman's World of Sport. Soon they might have to agree

on implementing a chip that monitors their metabolism 24/7 – only to make the lengths they'll have to go to trick the system even greater. Clean athletes who break one world record after another are the secular equivalent of celibate priests: role models of outrageous hypocrisy.

It would be more rewarding to transform elite sports into test grounds for the posthuman condition where extraordinary heroes experiment with whatever performance-enhancing technique is available. Life science and tech companies could sponsor them to test and promote their latest inventions. Parasports might then be able to level out current ableist biases and prejudices. From allowing prostheses that make you perform better than with natural limbs, it's a small step to allow for artificial webbing, gills or wings, gen editing, or performance-enhancing substances. Meanwhile, traditional elite sports could subsist as the last stronghold of a human revanchism, with athletes naked and barefoot just like in

Ancient Greece, divided into (the) two "natural" sexes.

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THERE ARE NO HEROES IN DRONE-RACING

Jaime Chu

I was click-baited into my first and only drone-racing video via a Bloomberg tweet that reported that in 2018, the world's youngest drone-racing champion was an eleven-year-old girl from Thailand, Wanraya Wannapong, aka Milk. Milk used to post videos of her practice races on her YouTube channel, and as I followed what

could only be described as a high-speed wasp hurtling itself through a grassy field with wire-framed obstacles, I started to wonder about the insurance policy at the FAI World Drone Racing Championships – the one Milk had won – because flying every day through FPV (first person view) goggles is definitely not good for the eyes. Milk hardly blinked in the interviews after her win. An article describes her secret to success as being "stoic under pressure".

FOV (field of view) drone-racing is an incredible sport where you can win by slouching in a plastic folding chair, sockless, in Adidas slides. Pilots wear headsets that simulate control from inside the flying drone. The goal of competition is simple: beat your opponents' drones by being the first to complete a race course. The sport's futuristic claims lie in how it actualises the blurry intersection of the real and the virtual, of tactile control and the perception of speed. Pre-mature, post-Obama prophecies about drone-racing's ascension to mainstream sports status had so far culminated in the early 2021 announcement from the Drone Racing League that it has partnered with the sports betting company DraftKings for legal, real-time wagers. The deal banks on the competitive fanaticism of a predominantly young male audience who is "deeply passionate about technology, science, and gaming" and doesn't necessarily follow traditional sports.

If there is no way around the drone's military provenance, is it wrong to want drone-racing to be better than this? The word "drone", which forces your lips to purse, makes me want to like it – fetishise it, even – while still knowing how unsavoury the knowledge of such a thing will be. The drone was first pacified when we learned from the "Drone Papers" that the US military uses sports expressions as operation codewords (is anyone surprised?). Now, the drone has again effectively been domesticated through its commercial iteration as a wager sport, leap-frogging from morally-bankrupt killing machine to techno-determinist alarm to consumer hobby in the span of just two

Photo: DRL / Steve Paston / PA Wire

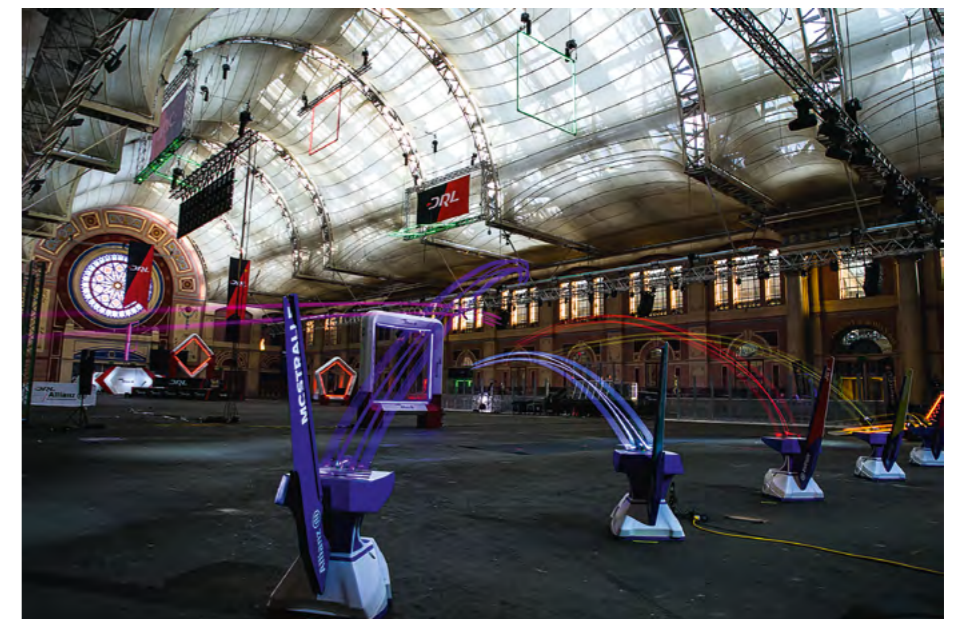


Allianz DRL China Invitational race at Cincinnati Mills Mall In Cincinnati, Ohio, 2019

American presidencies. This is the trajectory that writer Alex Quicho traces with dutiful lyricism in the first half of her *Small Gods* (2021), a demythologising of the drone that replaces its hegemonic Western political charge with its potential use as a site of projection through what she calls pragmatic futurism. "The drone lives as either a violent, horrific piece of technology or a really cheap, shitty piece of technology. I thought of the drone as a weird little glitch or short cut where it was hyper-accelerated in terms of its military

to civilian trajectory", Quicho said when I asked her to elaborate on the end of the drone as a political entity. "A lot of the western anxiety about the drone is like, what if this technology turns on us? I was interested in people who understood the root of that fear, but didn't think that fear forecloses the future all together."

Quicho doesn't apologise for hope or for projection. For her, the drone and its representation and appearances in cultural theory and contemporary art is the hinge that has led her



The Drone Racing League custom drones, the Racer3, in action at Alexandra Palace for the DRL Allianz World Championship race, London, 2017

through a three-year quest, writing *Small Gods* in order to measure a distance from the drone's ominous, apocalyptic overtones.

"It was not the first time that I, mired in disorder, wished that I could pull up and out to see the logic of the whole. Feeling like a cell in a body, unaware of the machine my tiny presence served, I yearned for the distance ... I found relief in tracing every ill – societal and personal – back to the 'concrete' consequences of nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism, the ceaseless engines that imagine, execute, and justify vast systemic cruelty."

I was curious about drone-racing the way I hope I would one day understand gaming, a mass culture that I see the point of in theory, mostly for its narrative potential, in a world where traditional media can no longer catch up. For the drone pilots, immersed in a virtual field of vision, the race quite literally happens all in their head; but, for most spectators, what we are transfixed by in the stadium are glowing electronic bugs that are proxies for the usual stakes in human sporting events, except these protagonists have no history, inspire no gossip, and communicate no emotional spin. What is a sport

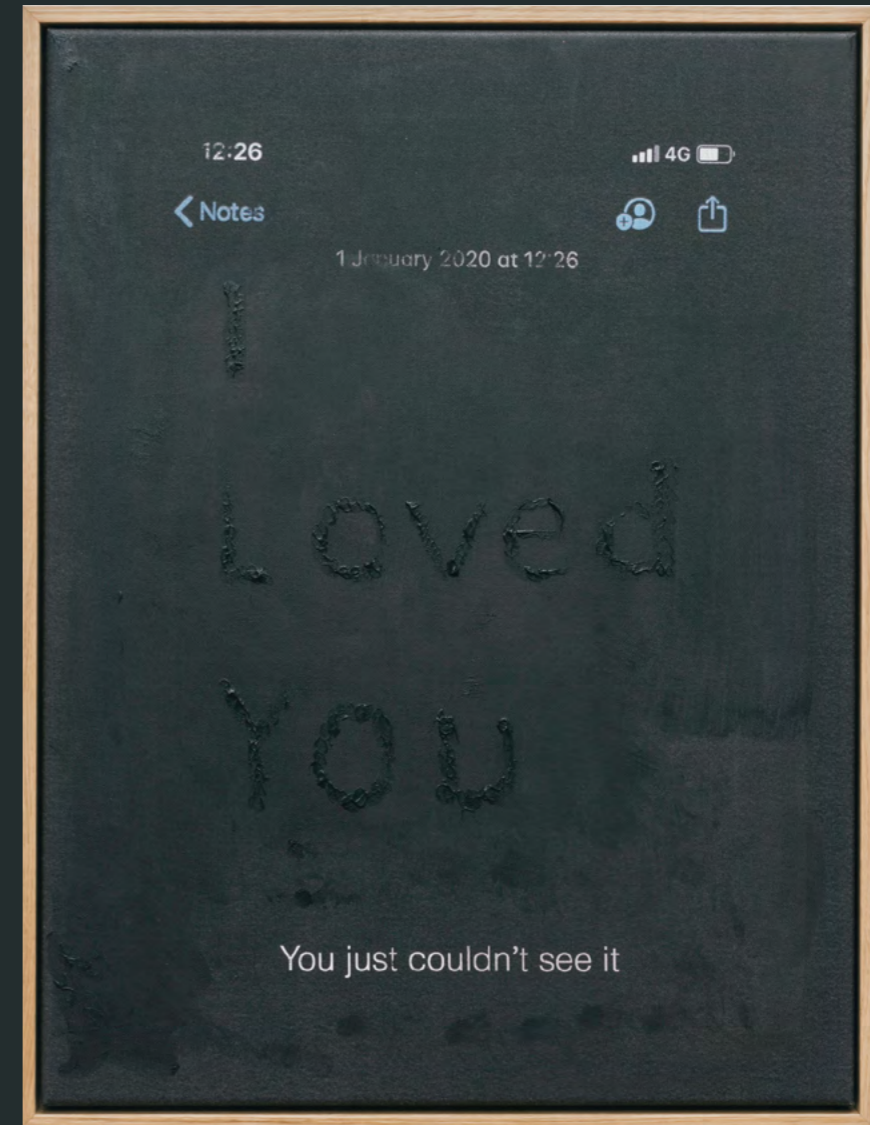
without heroes? If we reverse the course of the drone that might have otherwise evaporated into the nothingness of total speed, could we manage to feel something for the technologies we have built? If yes, then perhaps we could feel something for our own future, maybe even enough to change it. It made sense again when I looked up at the newspaper print I had picked up from MOCA years ago that I have since framed above my bed. "Machine learning machine feeling".

JAIME CHU is an editor, critic, translator, and Contributing Editor of Spike based in Beijing.



Wanraya Wannapong aka "Milk", winner of the 2018 China Drone Racing Open in Shenzhen Universiade Sports Centre

Photo: FAI / Marcus King



RICHIE CULVER
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