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#8

Joanna Wright with Taloi Havini

The Best Tools I Have Are My Eyes

“There are no neutral technologies,
or, positively put,
all technologies are non-neutral.”¹

¹ Don Ihde, *Postphenomenology: Essays in the Postmodern Context* (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, IL, USA, 1993), 33.

The first remotely operated drones were invented by the UK and the US during the first world war and in the interwar period. The word *drone* is thought to have been inspired by one of these early models, the DH.82B 'Queen Bee.' First deployed as ubiquitous technology in the US-Vietnam war, their function was to surveil, to drop leaflets for psychological operations, and to launch missiles.

As drone photography has been widely adopted by artists and documentarians, I find myself returning to the following questions:

What does it mean to collaborate with structures and technologies developed for and by the military, most widely used for violence and surveillance? How is this negotiation with technology made visible in a creative work, be it drone, or AI, or algorithm? What then, are the subsequent ethics of representation, of consent and of production?



[An overhead topographical drone image of an unknown industrial site, situated in a natural landscape. Shades of acid green outline manmade and natural structures and are overlaid with a digital grid for mining survey purposes.]

The hardware used to make any moving image work depends on the extraction of rare earth minerals. Drones are widely used in this extraction work, mapping for mining, producing the data needed to facilitate more efficient extraction and for (some) humans to avoid sites made hazardous by mining or military operations. Promotional materials for a drone company detail their use of spatial technology to collect topographical data “clear of any distortion,” as if the more advanced technology becomes, the more perfect and objective representations and simulations it can offer us.

The position of the camera in moving image work also implies a point of view, informing dialogue across and between spaces. By placing a camera somewhere a human eye cannot ordinarily access, an embodied dissonance is created. What is the purpose of this drone eye view?

On a sunny January day, Taloi Havini and I meet in Cardiff, to talk about her three-channel immersive film *Habitat* (2017), and discuss some of these questions. If I imagine the landscapes in *Habitat* in black and white, I can see the scarred slate landscape of north-west Wales, where I am from. I have traveled from my home to Cardiff, she much much further, from Bougainville where *Habitat* was made, tracing the lines and legacies of the Rio Tinto copper mines. I was deeply struck when I watched *Habitat*. The economy of the edit and juxtaposition of scale and position humanise the brutality of the aesthetics of extraction. There is a sense that this is a work produced over time, and within relationships: to land, to kin, to past, present and future.

The following is based on a transcript of our conversation, edited for length and clarity.

JW: Can you talk about the role of the drone in your work?

TH: To answer that question, I have to go back to the very first time I decided to film. The work that you have seen is not the first time that I have filmed there; there's another, shorter, single-channel film that I made. When I went to the open pit, to the quarry, it was saturated across the media as being one of the largest copper mines in the world.

In terms of the extraction of copper, all the attention is on this one site, Panguna. Journalists, history, everything that we have ever known about Bougainville to date has been dominated by mining. I also went there, around 2013, after the conflict, and photographed and looked at it with my own eyes with a normal camera.

A friend of mine who comes from another site, his family lives downstream from the copper mine at an area where their land meets the ocean, essentially where the mine dumped toxic waste, known as tailings. He said, "you know Tal, everyone always goes to the pit, but I really want you to go and film the damage down at my mother's people's place. The Company dammed seven natural rivers to make one toxic swamp, that was originally virgin forest."

I don't go anywhere where I am not invited, so he invited me, and lined it up so I would go and see his uncles, and be guided through the forest. I met his aunty, who was a matrilineal landowner. He said, "you will be met by them, and you film, you go and film down there, you go and experience the damage that the tailings have made."

I first went down with my GoPro, my little camera in a backpack, just me. I didn't have any big cameras or anything. So I took a trip down, it's very rugged country, four wheel drives, going through rivers, up and down, no mobile phone reception. I get down to the end of the road and I met them. I spent time with his family: "What we need to do is we need to take you into the middle of this swamp, so you can see the damage."

So I spent a few days walking and mapping with just them, and hearing their stories. We meandered through the swamp on rafts, and when we got to the middle of these reeds that are floating, I stood up and asked, "How far does this swamp go, how many meters there? How many meters over there?"

"We don't know, we don't know."

I have tried to look at satellite imagery too, but only very few people, like NASA or the military, have access to these kinds of detailed maps. The best thing we can do is Google Earth, but because of the mountainous ranges it brings all the cloud cover, so you can't actually see details and the extent. So I said to them, people have these things called drones, and explained it's like having this tiny camera on a little helicopter and it can go up and see places we can't using a remote control.

"You need to come back with that, you need to go and get one, and come back."

So I went back to Australia, looked up how much a drone cost, which was a lot of money back then, I certainly didn't get it quickly.

I ended up raising the funds to buy a drone, I went camping in Australia and taught myself how to use a drone. I had lots of failures, but I finally got the hang of it. I went back, turned up and said "I've got the drone." And that's the first time we were able to see the extent. It was quite unbelievable.

I went back to Australia, and I thought about it. But I did that journey that you see in the immersive film, and I thought I could really see this work. And it just so happened that I was invited to extend on my single channel work.

I was able to get a film crew, documentary filmmakers, Fabio Cavadini and Amanda King, known as Frontyard Films who made *An Evergreen Island* (2020). I really admired how they made that documentary, as activists they lived behind the military blockade on the side of the Bougainville people to make that film.

With funds for an artwork commission for *The National* (2017) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales I was able to employ Frontyard Films to help me make *Habitat*. I also worked with a sound designer, Michael Toisuta. and paired helicopter sounds to this (drone footage) technology. It was quite menacing, that journey (in editing). It's the only work I have done where I was so clear about each frame, and the sound. The drone is very much there, as a menacing presence – because the drone is essentially a helicopter, and the helicopter brought a lot of violence to our people,

through military shooting down at people, through exploration, through surveying. That is the role that the drone plays.

JW: That [feeling of] menacing was really clear. There's a moment where the single person we see looks directly at the camera, and it's very confronting. Can you speak about that moment?

TH: Yes, it's because of my distaste for the drone. Rather than looking at people, I wanted the person who's watching [the work] at the end, to look directly into Agata's eyes, or for Agata to look and to say "I see you, I see what you are doing."

She was great. I watched Agata as a woman, I don't know what she is doing today, but there are whole communities dependent on alluvial mining. Because people used to live there traditionally, were pushed out by the government and the company for the mine, but since the conflict and temporary closure they have gone back, and are mining. I watched her for quite a while, and she was very committed. She was sifting water and gravel with her own hands looking for gold. I asked her, "do you live here?" and she said "yes, this is my land, this is what I do." If she wasn't doing that she would be fishing or gardening. So I asked her if she would mind if I filmed her, and spoke about where the film was going to go (inside a gallery), and she said "whatever, I am just trying to find my gold." I said OK, do you think if I put the drone above, but at one point ask her to look at it, and

she said OK, and it was one take. And I don't know if she knows how powerfully it's made people like you feel.

What I have done with everybody, as part of my process, is to talk about it, to film it, and to immediately show it back, over and over again. If people want copies, I give them copies. I also remunerate people for their time. I used to run an organisation called Pacific Black Box in my twenties I worked in not-for-profit media in participatory media development, so I developed an ethical way of working with people in media-making. That is a big part of my process. I won't do it if I can't have people's consent, or remunerate people properly. Just be completely transparent about the process.

JW: Can we discuss the structures we work within as artists and as media makers? There's a sense in your work that it is being made in a dialogue, and not just for its own end. There is a clarity of editing in your work, but also a sense of a foundation of something that is much bigger than what is immediately visible.

TH: Process, for me, it's so cathartic. *Habitat* is about going back and finding the root causes, about why the environment is like it is, asking why do we have so much injustice around the environment. An artwork for me is about seeking out the root causes, in a language that doesn't conform to the West. It uses the tools of the West to speak back to their narrative, of why we are where we are.

I think that is the challenge as an artist: how do we do that? Painters deal with a blank canvas all the time. Learn to use the tools, learn the rules and then break them. Be creative in how you tell your narrative.

After *Habitat*, another gallery approached me to see if I had other films in mind. I got a grant from the Arts Council of the Australian government, which was amazing, because [purchasing copyright] from state archives costs a lot of money. I wanted it in perpetuity and there are all kinds of rules, like you can only show it for TV, or you can only show it for cinema, and I wanted to buy it outright. I went for the most expensive license, so I had to be selective, and I spent the best part of a year watching anything and everything I could possibly see from early as 1950s, 1960s and 1970's. I ended up going a little bit mad, watching that much footage, but it just meant that I knew everything I could, and I wouldn't say I was a good editor, but I knew what I wanted for that purpose and story.

One of these propaganda films from the mining company was to show "let's bring these primitive societies into the present day, let's take them out from the stone age."

In a scene from *My Valley is Changing* (1970) a man is shaking this map and saying, "come on now, you might as well just accept it, this is the future." And a woman is shouting back at him in her native language. In that propaganda film, it just stops. Watching that scene made me

angry that a white man is able to speak – but she was *saying something back to him*. What was she saying?

I asked Nasioi speaker Kuntamari Crofts who translated it, saying, “No, we will always be here.”

I was able to put that in subtitles and put that into the next film. And so that was a way of giving her voice back, because these people from Australia, they were never going to know what she said, but I was able to re-edit that film, and change it, and to make it my own. It was really satisfying to give her voice back. For Australians to see that she spoke back to that man back in the 1960s. That really she never consented to be removed from her land. Small things like that: that I could use the state archive, buy that piece of archive and create my own archive. It was incredibly satisfying.

JW: That’s something that I also find incredibly powerful about archives: the potential to challenge the narrative, or be in dialogue with the established narrative, or reimagine the narrative now. I also think it has potential as a window for the future. Audiovisual archives are really valuable to expose how big culture shifts can and do happen.

TH. And you know if you spend time with them, they end up speaking back to you.

JW: I’ve been reading around the history of the drone, looking around how the drone is deployed in topography

surveillance, and reading corporate drone brochures, where the language is quite extraordinary; all these claims for a view with no distortion. And this is an interest within my own practice: does the development of technology mean that somehow our understanding of the world is perfected, or is it actually the opposite.

TH: I think there is a danger. The idea that the more you advance the technology, you become more impotent. We are becoming quite useless as humans, our reliance on artificial intelligence. I will never forget when I said to a geologist, “you must use very high end tools when you go to find minerals and things,” and he said “the best tools I have are my eyes.”

I think that reminds me about indigeneity, and how important it is to live on the land, and be on the land, and know the land and be in symbiosis with nature and to hand this down over generations. If you take a person away from the land, you take their knowledge away.

JW: In my work I started using architectural scanners to try and scan nature. They can't do it, there's lots of missing detail.

TH: They are looking for straight lines...

JW: That's what I'm interested in: what are the things that technology can not capture. In your work, the overlaying of

the language of the mining maps, the visual language of the maps speaks to that, is just about what's here to take, and the licensing of space.

TH: Yes, it was important to show how the surveying mining map, which comes over the three screens, but really you're looking at an extreme close-up of a river, and scale is constantly shifting and changing. It's a long time that map is coming up over the blue (copper), and it's very subtle, but the sound is actually a morse code, the little beeping in the undertones.

Pairing this language of the morse code with the mapping is speaking to covert operations. The morse code is a repeat of SOS, really slowly.

JW: What was the process of consent, or not consent, for the mines to be there? Was land expropriated?

TH: It was deemed under crown law. It was known there was gold there, but it wasn't until the Australians had the colonial license to go in and determine how much and where. And as they were collecting these samples, they were also getting people ready to leave. Mining and the land didn't happen alone, it was happening in tandem with post-WW2 Australians who had served there at the same time were given these packages, these Aussie soldiers were told, "you can have this plantation at a low price because you served in the army." At that time, the government said you'll get this

wealth, but we'll also get Australian men to come in and start taking up land. A way of using colonial law to justify removal of people.

At the same time, you had missionaries sympathising with local people: asking if you move these people off their land then where are they going to go? So the people became "problems," where are you going to put them? It was really, really destructive.

The colonial government really did believe that they were progressing, and that these people would just cope with it. They had no idea that people themselves felt they had land rights, and that it was connected through genealogy, especially matrilineal on one side and patrilineal on the other. They had no idea that people would fight, and end up taking arms; they were completely shocked. There were some Australians who said "we had no idea that land meant so much to them, we had no idea that they depend on the land," like they were innocent.

It wasn't until people like my father and his generation, who graduated from university and decided they wanted self governance. So the mining companies packed up. It became a political issue.

But it's very complicated, because the Bougainville people, the mining corporation, in their so called innocence really did educate the local people. Some people got engineering

degrees, the people of my dad's generation became middle management, and proved that they could be engineers and computer scientists, and it was actually better then than it is now. The whole mining industry has changed the way they operate. They would never now give people these opportunities. The mining industry now is fly in, fly out, they are never going to create a town and have people live there, they are not interested in that now. So now you have planes of white people who fly into Papua New Guinea for 10 day shifts, and they fly back to Australia, they fly in and out, so there is no sense of community or society. It's pure extraction.

JW: Documentary as a project has also been historically tied up with other agendas: extraction, empire, marketing...

TH: We've come too far now, we know it's an imposition to just turn up to someone's place and say "I'm going to tell your story," especially for indigenous people. Indigenous people know how to use a camera!

JW: And [it brings questions about] the space where knowledge is created, which knowledge is privileged or valued.

How do you see time in your work? I know that's an open ended question.

TH: Yes, well, it's an open ended thing isn't it, time?

I haven't cut myself off from saying that there won't be more *Habitats*, because we could spend a lifetime knowing a place.

There is something great about long form, and being committed to one particular place. As long as I am alive... I mean, I come from a particular place in the north, and when you own land as an indigenous owner, it's not individual: it's collective. I get people asking me from the West, "What of it is yours? If everyone owns everything then how do you manage it? how do you own it?"

Individual property, this capitalist venture, has completely blocked people's ability to understand that you can collectively live and exist somewhere without having that plot, or patch of grass. So there's a responsibility of care, and it's just that our people have come over generations to care for this area, and those over there for that area, and we all co-exist. It's not perfect, and there are issues, but there isn't a title, there isn't a deed, there isn't a piece of paper, we all agree on that at least. I see time as cyclical, not linear.

JW: Given the work you have done in archives, do you imagine your work as being in dialogue with someone in the future?

TH: Absolutely. In dialogue with the past as well. It's a really good question because I don't think people think like that

normally, people think “what can I do for me now, for my lifetime.”

JW: Working at a nuclear site made me think about these questions. I am in the slice of a story that started before I was born, and won't finish before I die. How do I steward a piece of it, and maybe pass it on.

TH: I think about that a lot because I love history, and it astounds me how people disregard talking to your elders. “everything that is on this phone will tell me the truth.” Talk to someone, not an algorithm.

This trip is making me realise there is more to this learning. As an artist, you send your work out, but being privileged to come here with my work – with that comes engaging with people, and place, and their history. That's worth it, that's amazing. You don't know what opportunities that opens up even if it's just my brain and how I think about things, and how do I share that with people from my village.

The way to think about the future is to document a slice of now. It's always going to be up to whose hands it lands in. You can only hope it goes to the right hands.

Joanna Wright is a documentary maker, artist and creative producer based in Llanedwen, Ynys Môn. She is currently an artist research fellow at MIT Open Documentary Lab [Co-Creation Studio](#).

Taloi Havini (Nakas Tribe, Hakö people) employs a research practice informed by her matrilineal ties to her land and communities in Bougainville. This manifests in works created using a range of media including photography, video, sculpture, installation and print. She was [announced](#) as the winner of the Artes Mundi 10 prize in January 2024. taloihavini.com

‘**The Best Tools I Have Are My Eyes**’ is the final instalment in [a series of 8 newly commissioned texts](#) developed alongside [Artes Mundi 10](#), which is showing in Cardiff, Swansea, Newtown and Llandudno between October 2023 and February 2024.

Artist, gwneuthurwr dogfen a chynhyrchydd yw **Joanna Wright**, sy'n byw yn Llanedwen, Ynys Môn. Mae'n artist-gymrawd ymchwil ar hyn o bryd gyda [Co-Creation Studio](#) yr Open Documentary Lab yn MIT.

Gyrrir gwaith **Taloi Havini** (llwyth Nakas, pobl Hakö) gan brosesau ymchwil i'w chysylltiadau matrilineal â'i thir a'i chymunedau yn Bougainville. Mae'n ddefnyddio ystod eang o gyfryngau, gan gynnwys ffotograffiaeth, fideo, cerflunwaith, gosodiadau a phrint. [Cyhoeddwyd](#) fel enillydd gwobr Artes Mundi 10 ym mis Ionawr 2024. taloihavini.com

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