

## ANTENNA AESTHETICS

When on holiday in Tuscany during the summer of 2007 I visited the Maremma National Park, renowned for its rich vegetation, wildlife and cultural heritage. Here I encountered a seemingly uninhabited, square-shaped historical building sporting a brick tower. On top of the tower a large pair of binocular-like objects stood out against the Mediterranean blue sky, surveying the surrounding salt marshlands and the coastline beyond.

A closer look revealed several antennas of various shapes that obviously fulfilled different functions. Exactly what the tower was watching, and to whom it was sending and receiving information was left to my vivid imagination. Pirates and paranormal activity came to mind before the more down to earth solution; considering its prominent position in the nature reserve, it probably serves as an environmental observation tower. Yet the combination of the padlock on the entrance door and its wireless watchers, measures, senders and receivers evoked an uncanny feeling of the comings and goings of a stealthy “something else”, giving the building an eerie presence on the landscape.

Looking at the snapshots I took of it today it appears as less mysterious, yet equally appealing. I see a time machine; an historical observation tower who’s previous envisaged telescopes, wind gauges, etc, have been replaced throughout the course of several hundred years with the latest technology. It is as if the strata of time have been crunched together between the old structure at the bottom and the new devices on the top, forming a gap in which a speculative narrative can occur between the visible and the hidden.

Driving to the airport in Rome at the end of the holiday I spotted a petrol station with a cell phone mast dressed up as a plastic palm tree - a classic disguise that reminded me of similar antennas I had first seen in California a couple of years previously. Only this time it demanded a photograph that was consciously taken to document the contrast between two nodes of networked culture; the brazenly obvious

transmitters on top of the observation tower in the National Park, and the attempt to camouflage a cell phone mast as a form of “nature” on the motorway. Thus began the ongoing practice of taking snapshots of antennas as I encounter them in my everyday life.

The example of the palm tree antenna reveals more than it conceals. Via attempting to trade technological awareness with a simulated nature experience, its synthetic aesthetics draws attention to the materiality of the very communications infrastructure that it is designed to hide. I live in Norway where such antenna trees are hard to come by. Much more common are the monumental towers that stick out of the tops of mountains. Observing them from a distance, they appear to me as giant hypodermic syringes that reflect a pride in technological innovation, while supplying information junkies with a constant stream of data. In the city, cell towers on the tops of buildings take on a more mundane industrial appearance. Wireless surveillance cameras and their associated antennas fit so snugly into the architecture of their host structures that they become almost as invisible as the electromagnetic waves they relay.

Travelling to Berlin revealed another strategy of installation; namely the appropriation of statues that adorn the tops of cultural institutions as placeholders for the instruments of tele-surveillance. I am almost positive that if I had not become so practiced in lifting my head to the skies in search of new antenna aesthetics I would not have spotted them. Upon encountering the one after the other I got the impression that the various goddesses and gargoyles were gossiping about the state of the city from their privileged vantage point between heaven and earth.

Yet another unusual encounter occurred while sitting at my computer before an actual journey took place. A webcam situated on top of a weather observation station in Wendover, Utah, USA that can be controlled remotely via the internet allowed me not only to survey the surrounding area - the Bonneville Salt Flats, airport, military base and

casinos of West Wendover - but also the structure and antennas of the tower itself. I observed the observer observing itself, and documented the experience by taking a snapshot of my screen with simultaneous keyboard clicks; cmd-shift-3.

Generally speaking, infrastructure visualisations take the form of computer-generated flowcharts that approximate the spatial relationships between nodes in a network. However, they do not account for the uniqueness of each node; their physical appearance in relation to a specific location, and the multiple narratives that the combination can evoke. Documenting the instruments of wireless transmissions as they appear in their “native” surroundings has brought with it an awareness of the conditions and consequences of the emergence of telecommunications technology.

Transactions that often go unnoticed, such as the sale and lease of public and private property and the allocation of bandwidths of the electromagnetic spectrum, have contributed to redefining urban, suburban and rural environments, as well as changing the patterns of everyday life. Antennas silently bare witness to these issues, as well as the presence of the invisible choreographies of electromagnetic fields, pulses and waves as they pass through our bodies, homes and cities, across oceans and deserts and out into space.



- Amanda Steggell, February 2010, Berlin