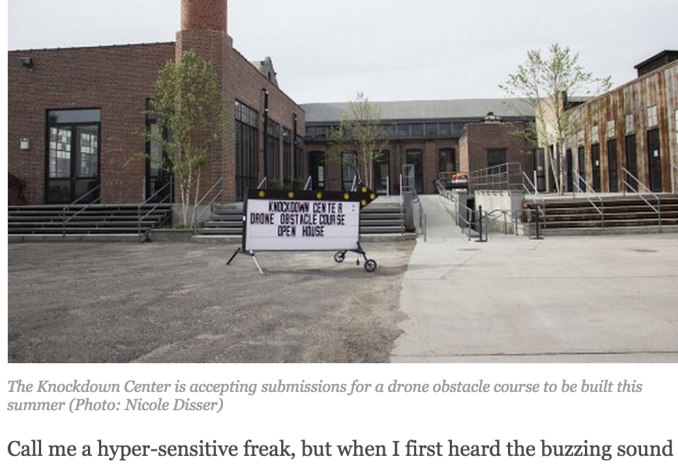


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BY NICOLE  
DISSER

GALLERY SCENE

## Drones to Invade Knockdown Center This Summer



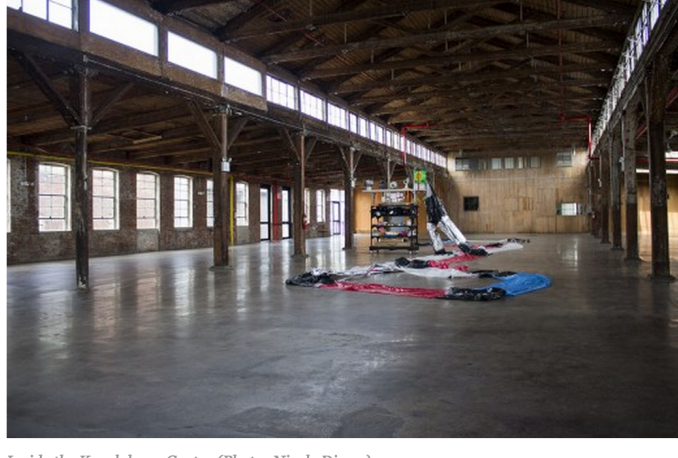
The Knockdown Center is accepting submissions for a drone obstacle course to be built this summer (Photo: Nicole Disser)

Call me a hyper-sensitive freak, but when I first heard the buzzing sound of a drone hovering above the smooth concrete floor at **Knockdown Center**, I got the chills. There's something deeply ominous about drones, not least of all because they've become synonymous with a futuristic, one-sided (for now anyway) kind of warfare that's shrouded in secrecy. Somewhat evil undeniably, but drones are also fascinating. "I have a drone newsfeed and stuff pops up like every day, probably 10 or 15 different stories ranging from 'Three People Killed in Pakistan' to 'Drone Captures Surfing Dolphin' or 'Perverts are Spying on People,'" said Michael Merck, the creative director at Knockdown Center. It's no wonder, then, that the Queens-based art center has chosen drones as the centerpiece of its summer exhibition.

Specifically, the curators at the Knockdown Center have dreamed up an interactive exhibition that welcomes the input of artists, non-artists, drone enthusiasts, and even people like me, who have never flown a drone, to help build and navigate the perils of a **drone obstacle course**.

"The plan right now is to make two courses, one that's speed based and another that's intricate with more technical obstacles," Merck explained.

"There are people who are really skilled at piloting these things," Vanessa Thill, a curator at the center, explained. "It takes a little getting used to, as we know from crashing them into the walls a few times. There are a lot of drone enthusiasts who I think are interested in racing and testing out the stuff."



Inside the Knockdown Center (Photo: Nicole Disser)

The center held an open house yesterday, meant to give possible participants and nosy press a glimpse of the massive space. The Knockdown Center is a former door factory in Maspeth, Queens (which is just on the border of Ridgewood, but if you've never been, feels not unlike a forgotten industrial town in Jersey) and its immense size was actually part of what inspired the drone project. "A drone came our way," Merck explained. "And it's really good for panning shots, which are definitely more representational of our space than still-photography. The drone actually approximately represented the space." The obstacle course was born from that, as well as the fact that drones are so multifaceted and very right-now in the public imagination (hence **drone paintings** and the **drone film festival**)

When I stopped by, Vanessa offered me the controls to a **Parrot Bebob drone**— a remote much bigger than any I'd ever seen. This particular drone allows the remote pilot to fly the thing via drones-eye-view broadcast on an iPad screen, whereas many drones are flown by enthusiasts wearing goggles.

"The drones themselves have very small video cameras and video transmitters on board broadcasting a low-res signal in real-time transmission," said Steve Cohen, president of the Drone User Group Network, a local drone hobbyist group. "So you're basically flying it like you're sitting in it, that's the visual feedback you get through the goggles, what the camera sees, so you're really getting a two dimensional representation of the pilot's view."



(Photo: Nicole Disser)

At first, I resisted the opportunity to fly the thing. I felt kind of weird about it, for one, and secondly I was nervous about crashing it into a window and getting kicked to the curb and uninvited back. But then I thought about what Steve Cohen had said. "Any time I show the technology to people who are seeing it for the first time, they're really excited and I don't want to say converted, but they're like 'Oh, I never realized this is what we're talking about.' They're small and kind of cute—maybe cute's the wrong word— but they're not threatening and really cool and what a nifty toy."

Eventually curiosity won out over neuroses so I tried it out. It was certainly difficult, but slightly easier to fly than I'd imagined, at least when the drone was within sight. It was a different story when I had to rely on the iPad screen. But for the first time I could feel what separated this thing from a remote control airplane. The drone could simply hover.

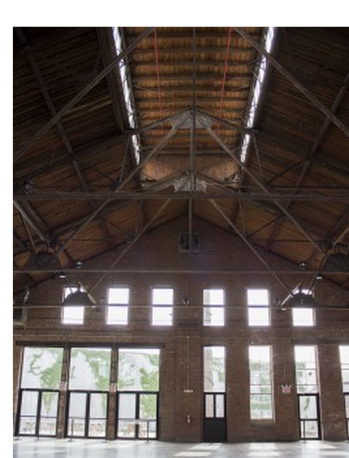
I was immediately brought back to a *New Yorker* article, *Unblinking Stare*, that appeared last year, which led to my first real understanding of drones. There's a horrifying passage about drones' ability to hover "for hours, or even days, before striking," a fact that truly rattled me. And here I was watching this toy drone simply hover in a nearly empty art space while artists, curators, and others lingered around, joking about drones.



(Photo: Nicole Disser)

"People are using drones a lot more for photography, but there's definitely this very sinister element of what drones *can* be used for and what they *are* being used for," Thill said. "The consumer-grade ones are fun toys, but there's definitely a dark side to it that we hope will be rectified somehow."

"We encourage people to think of it from all different directions," Merck added.



(Photo: Nicole Disser)

The Knockdown Center hasn't gone into this blindly. They also approached Steve Cohen for his perspective on drones and advice on how to keep things safe, and to help untangle some technical issues. "I was just giving them some tips if they're flying outdoors, what to be on the lookout for and how to keep it safe for the pilots and the spectators and maybe some technical advice," Cohen explained. "Also how to make it more compelling for people who are viewing, rather than participating. You can't fly something really huge in there."

In his opinion, the largest drone that should fly in the space is the Phantom, a drone made of that should fly in the space is the Phantom, a drone made of that ubiquitous shape you've seen a lot of, maybe not," Cohen laughed. "But even that's a large aircraft for that space to begin with, so we're recommending they stick to frame sizes that are 250 mm or less."

Cohen and his techy friends who help promote any positive use of drone technology. But I wondered how he felt about the drone's crossover into the art world. "I think it's wonderful, but the thing to remember is the early adapters of drones are usually filmmakers and photographers, people involved in the arts to begin with," he said. "My background is in commercial photography, I'm very technical in my approach and that's what got me involved in drones about four years ago."

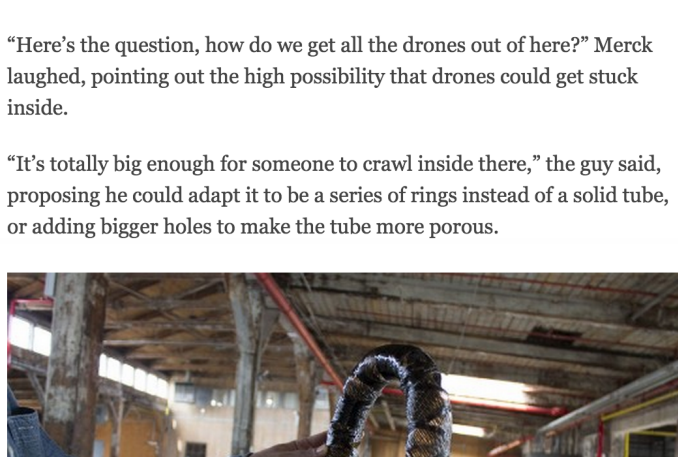
But Cohen isn't blind to the political implications of drones. "Awareness is increasing and I think more and more people understand there are the nasty, mean drones that armies use that are weaponized and flown by people in shipping containers in Reno and then over Afghanistan, and then there are the friendly drones that take really beautiful video and have a huge hobbyist component."

He added: "I do think that it certainly doesn't hurt to illustrate again and again and again, the gee-whiz factor about them."

Back at the Knockdown Center, a couple of guys, one toting a skateboard, presented a prototype made of basalt fiber to Merck. It was a twisted tube, with small gaps in the fiber.

"Here's the question, how do we get all the drones out of here?" Merck laughed, pointing out the high possibility that drones could get stuck inside.

"It's totally big enough for someone to crawl inside there," the guy said, proposing he could adapt it to be a series of rings instead of a solid tube, or adding bigger holes to make the tube more porous.



A prototype (Photo: Nicole Disser)

Merck said the center has received "a number of proposals from sculptors and people who identify as artists," but that he hopes to attract a broad range of people to the application process. "We're hoping to have a live stream come in on a feed, hopefully in the back. I think we determined it's probably best to have five racers at a time. So our live feed would be five racers and three other cameras, either a drone pilot that's in the mix with the others, capturing or a mix of other cameras, one at the finish line at least," he explained. "We should probably just set up the viewing area to look like a sports bar. We can't really serve beer but we can definitely make some... wings."

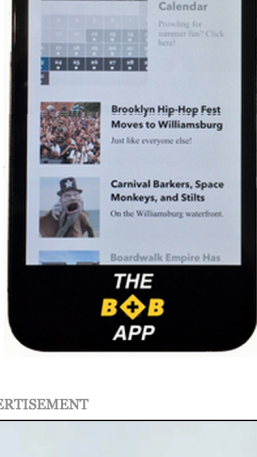
The Knockdown Center has issued an *open call* for drone obstacle course participants, submissions are due June 1st. The installation is expected to be on view from August 1st to September 13th with active fly times Saturdays and Sundays from 2-6pm.

TAGS: ARTS + CULTURE, BEYOND, DRONE ART, DRONE USER GROUP NETWORK, DRONES, INSTALLATIONS, INTERACTIVE ART, KNOCKDOWN CENTER, MASPEETH, MICHAEL MERCK, QUEENS, STEVE COHEN, VANESSA THILL

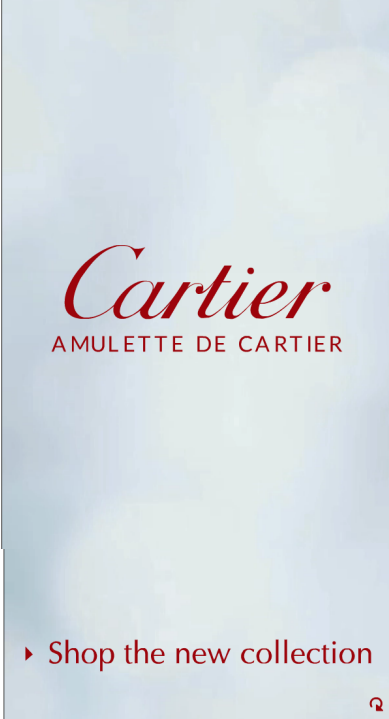
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