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In Miami, It's a Bird. It's a Plane. It's ... a Flock of Drones?

By FARAH NAYERI DEC. 5, 2017



A rendering of a flying installation, made up of 300 lighted drones, by Studio Drift in partnership with BMW. Studio Drift, Courtesy Pace Gallery

Miami's [Faena district](#) is being overtaken for several nights by a large, iridescent swarm, sweeping across the sky in a seemingly choreographed routine. The mass is made up, not of birds, but of drones: 300 of them, each equipped with a light source.

[“Franchise Freedom”](#) is a work by the Amsterdam-based artist duo Lonneke Gordijn and Ralph Nauta, known as Studio Drift. Their art examines the connections between technology and nature, and is in the collections at museums like the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#), the [Victoria & Albert Museum in London](#) and the [Rijksmuseum in](#)

Amsterdam.

The drones are controlled by a computer algorithm: a complex formula that changes when one of the parameters changes, resulting in “a flocking behavior that mimics what you can see in real birds in the sky, or fish in the sea,” Ms. Gordijn said.

The piece, which was funded by BMW, is a metaphor for human society and its notions of freedom, she said.

“We, as people, think being able to fly and being released from gravity is the ultimate way of being free,” she said. “But actually this swarm is very much determined by all sorts of rules. So is freedom.”

Studio Drift’s goal, she said, was to look for “processes in nature that say who we are as people.”

The New York-based Pace Gallery is presenting the work in Miami. Earlier this year the gallery displayed another Studio Drift work at the Armory Show in New York — a concrete block titled “Drifter” that floated mysteriously in midair. Marc Glimcher, Pace’s president, said the collaboration with [Studio Drift](#) started a couple of years ago as part of the gallery’s drive to work more with experiential art.



Lonneke Gordijn and Ralph Nauta, artists based in Amsterdam, founded Studio Drift. Their art examines the connections between technology and nature.

J.W. Kaldenbach

“Studio Drift has a real interest in the collision of ancient expectations and modern expectations,” Mr. Glimcher said. “Ancient expectations are to watch the acrobatics of starlings as they respond to light, and this mysterious dance that they do.

“Our modern expectation is to see a machine like a drone function in a very different way — in a very controlled and very arithmetic fashion. When we see a flock of drones perform like a flock of birds, we have those expectations on a beautiful collision course,” he added.

Studio Drift’s co-founders met on their first day at the cutting-edge [Design Academy Eindhoven](#), in the Netherlands, where they were both students. The academy had a lasting influence on their practice, teaching them about “making things happen” and “believing anything in your mind without knowing the outcome: that you don’t have to have total control over a process,” Ms. Gordijn said.

The two graduated in 2006 and have been collaborating ever since.

What got the pair noticed early on was Ms. Gordijn’s graduation project, “Fragile Future,” a cluster of ball-shaped LED lights with real dandelion seeds glued onto them, giving the bulbs a flowerlike appearance. The light sculpture was developed further with Mr. Nauta, and led to Studio Drift being signed on by the Carpenters Workshop Gallery in London in 2009.

Mr. Nauta said that while Ms. Gordijn was driven by processes in nature, he had always been fascinated by science fiction, like “most tech nerds.”



"Drifter," also by the studio, was a concrete block that floated mysteriously in midair, at the Armory Show in New York. Studio Drift, Courtesy Pace Gallery

"All of these tech kids read a lot of science fiction," he said. "Science fiction authors are inventors of the new time."

He said that recently the dizzying speed of progress in the digital age was leading young engineers to believe in "doomsday scenarios" whereby technology would turn into "this destructive force." As a result, he said, the tech world was drifting "far away from society."

Studio Drift's role as artists, he said, was to "build a relationship between natural phenomena and technology to take the tech world back to human skill, so they get a strong reference to nature, to what the world is actually about."

Though it's not produced by or part of Art Basel Miami Beach, "Franchise Freedom" fits in with the fair's broader program of outdoor art displays, known as Public. This year's program, steered by the curator and critic Philipp Kaiser, includes the recreation of a flags-and-music work by Daniel Buren, and a progressive rock opera by Jim Shaw and his band, said Noah Horowitz, Art Basel Americas director.

Outdoor art projects allow galleries and artists "to show beyond the ultimately confined parameters of an art fair booth," Mr. Horowitz said. Because many of the works are for sale, he said, "it's an added opportunity to exhibit with us," as well as to "engage with the public that's not always necessarily coming into our halls."

Asked whether "Franchise Freedom" was for sale, a spokesman for the Pace Gallery said it was not. He added that Studio Drift and the gallery were working on a model whereby the work could be leased in the future.