

Michael Stevenson  
*Signs & Wonders*  
April 2 – May 21, 2016

*Signs & Wonders* is an installation by artist Michael Stevenson. Connecting aviation, the 20th century's Pentecostal movements, education, and anthropology, the work incites the viewer to consider the global distribution of technology and belief.

The project consists of four hand-built 1980s era flight simulators paired with more recent simulator technology that charts virtual flight paths in Melanesia. The resulting mise-en-scène hints at an educational environment, a flight school, or perhaps something more foundational. Constructed as an amalgam, each unit comprises two diverse sculptural forms — part mock-cockpit, part free-standing screen — accompanied by various on-board props and carpets laid out in the gallery. Together they become a network of interfaces that, although mere approximation, remain functional as a vehicle for the viewer to experience silent, imaginary flight.

The simulators transport the viewer to remote areas in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, one of the world's least explored countries, both culturally and geographically. Here, small aircraft play a vital role in navigating difficult terrain and transporting cargo from the outside. The airplane therefore holds particular significance for the local population as well as for the Christian missionaries in the region. The simulators are placed in opposing pairs, each coupling representing a single flight route in both the outbound and inbound direction. Within the software, both legs are flown at the same time and in the same airspace but lack shared traffic control; the potential for mid-air imposition and apocalypse remains embedded in these crudely rendered flights. In this world, however, any such catastrophic events are held in suspension: instead of collision, the viewer simply experiences onward flight as the aircraft pass invisibly around and through each other on their way to their respective destinations.

The flight paths link real village locations in the Papua New Guinean highlands that present some of the most challenging terrain for aviation: short, uneven landing strips are commonplace and extreme weather conditions prevail. A significant number of these remote air links are operated by missionary aviation organizations. This is one of the most Christianized regions on the globe: today approximately 95% of the country's citizens identify themselves as Christian. However, their belief system often coexists in parallel with others, superimposed onto traditional beliefs in a spirit world and in the power of magic and sorcery. The imposition of one system onto the other, one technology onto another, one temporality onto another provides the airspace in which *Signs & Wonders* operates. The density of this air is heavy, close to what Steven Connor and Maria José de Abreu have referred to as a pre-modern conception of air being “thickly populated and animated by a plethora of entities, substances, odors, humors and specters.”

*Signs & Wonders* resonates with the recent anthropological focus on the rise of Pentecostalism within the Evangelical movement; to date, one of the largest but least analyzed globalizing forces of the last one hundred years. Stevenson references its history through objects such as airplane blankets, flight

simulator manuals, and numerous religious books published beginning in the late 1960s. These books include titles by Hal Lindsey, C. Peter Wagner, John Wimber, and George Eldon Ladd and the history they present is by nature conflicted. Highlighted are the innovations of the School of World Missions at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, where many of these authors were involved; becoming chief architects both theologically and practically, they laid the groundwork for exchange between periphery and center within the global proliferation of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. This activity in Pasadena spread widely and became known as the “Third Wave” and also as “Signs and Wonders.”

This form of religious practice was deeply experiential, and included prophecy, healing, speaking in tongues, and miracles, all of which were associated with messianic return. It arose in many places, such as Michael Stevenson’s native New Zealand, and in North America via the association of Vineyard churches and more latterly the Toronto Blessing. This particularly ecstatic revival began in the early 1990s at Toronto Airport Vineyard (known today as Catch the Fire Toronto). Their services included “carpet time,” where members would ecstatically fall onto the carpeted floor, sometimes roaring like lions, claiming to be filled or “soaked” in the Holy Spirit.

Stevenson’s twinned aircraft flight patterns echo the spatio-temporal paradoxes that remain at the very core of these collisions between imminence and transcendence. These contradictory mindsets have been referred to by anthropologist Joel Robbins as “everyday millenarianism” — a temporal state of existence where one functions in the daily present and simultaneously in messianic time, a state whereby return may indeed be imminent. The presence of a future that never arrives sits as shifted cargo in the hold, exaggerating the roll, pitch, and yaw of the aircraft’s fitful flights; it projects beyond the screen into the psychological state of the active belief systems on-board.

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Michael Stevenson is a Berlin-based artist. He has exhibited widely in recent years at Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow (2015); Sculpture Center, New York (2015); Tate Modern, London (2014) and the biennials in Berlin and Liverpool (both 2014). Selected solo exhibitions include *Signs & Wonders*, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen (2015); *A Life of Crudity, Vulgarity, and Blindness*, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main (2012); *Nueva Matemática*, Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City (2012); and *A Question of How Things Behave*, Objectif Exhibitions, Antwerp (2010). Stevenson is currently professor of sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts, Nürnberg.

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