

DroneART, a Product of Surveillance Criticism

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Abstract:

Drones are remotely piloted aircrafts (RPA) that are mostly used for surveillance but also to search for victims/soldiers, help rescue teams, guard suspects and carry out attacks. In order to attack is necessary to own legitimacy, and The United States tend to legitimize their attack actions as a defense response to the events of September 11 and continues to do so by raising the flag of the so called “War against terror”. By referring Hardt and Negri we understand that military power can be legitimized when their function is to maintain order, but not necessarily peace. Making possible to carry out legal, illegal and immoral acts of violence as long as this violence results in the production and maintenance of imperial order. The DroneArt enters the art circuit questioning the existing biopolitics in the use of drones. The re-appropriations are done in different shapes and intensities. The artists’ concerns are linked to the military; unauthorized surveillance; disregard for borders; no official statement of armed conflict, lack of justice to the families of innocents that were killed in these attacks, etc.. Drones are already present in various environments, in the Armed Forces, in corporations and also in the hands of civilians. We live in a moment in which there are no major wars, but many small armed conflicts. It is increasingly difficult to understand the distinctions between legitimate violence, crime and terrorism. If the legitimation of violence is not clear, then all the violence is within a range of gray tones but do not cease to oppress their citizens. The DroneART reveals the importance of questioning this violence that approach us as fast as the shadows of the clouds.

Keywords: drone art, RPA, drones, surveillance, resistance.

According to the U.S. Army manual about drones, called *Eyes of the U.S. Army Roadmap for Unmanned Aircraft Systems*, in 1915, Nicola Tesla introduced the concept of unmanned flight in his dissertation describing an armed aircraft designed to defend The United States. In 1919, Elmer Sperry, the creator of the gyroscope and autopilot technology, used an unmanned aircraft to sink a captured German ship as part of a demonstration of this new technology. Already in 1953 at Fort Huachuca in Arizona was done a complete test of the Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) and in 1979 the Armed Forces did the first major acquisition of drones for the Aquila Program. During the operational tests in 1987, only seven of the hundred and five flights were successful. In 1985, the Department of Defense (DOD) purchased the *Pioneer*, which was the first drone that flew over three hundred combat missions during Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm hunting missiles and high-value targets. The learned operational lessons and needs with the *Global War on Terror* (GWOT) induced the Armed Forces to increase the power of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS).

Drone is the most commonly named used by national and international media to talk about Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) or Remotely Piloted Aircrafts (RPA). These aircrafts better known as drones can be sent anywhere from anywhere on the globe. Other countries are beginning to adopt this type of surveillance and defense devices, and one of these countries is Brazil, according to a press release done on February five 2013, Embraer will begin producing drones.

The U.S. Army began combat operations in October 2001 with 54 operational Hunter and Shadow unmanned aircraft. Today, the Army has over 4,000 unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) in various sizes and capabilities with still more programmed. After nearly 9 years of continuous combat operations, we have significantly evolved the way we employ UAS in support of our Warfighters. These adaptations are reflected in the tremendous growth of platforms and the expanded capabilities in the current UAS force. (U.S. Army UAS Roadmap, 2010, p. i).

Drones are remotely piloted aircrafts that are often used for surveillance but also to search for victims/soldiers, help rescue teams, guard suspects and carry out attacks. In order to attack is necessary to own legitimacy, and The United States tend to legitimize their attack actions as a defense response to the events of September 11. And agreeing with Hardt and Negri we understand that military power can be legitimized when their function is to maintain order, but not necessarily peace. Making possible to carry out legal, illegal and immoral acts of

violence as long as this violence results in the production and maintenance of imperial order. The line of reasoning proposed by Hardt and Negri (2004) is confirmed in the following quote:

The global security environment is more ambiguous and unpredictable than in the past. Many national security and intelligence experts share the Army's assessment that the next several decades will be characterized by persistent conflict – protracted confrontation among state, non-state, and individual actors that are increasingly willing to use violence to achieve their political and ideological ends... Future operations in this dynamic environment will likely span the spectrum of conflict from peacekeeping operations to counterinsurgency to major combat. 2009 Army Posture Statement. (U.S. Army UAS Roadmap, 2010, p. 19).

Through the statements above, the DroneArt enters the art circuit questioning the biopolitics in the use of drones. The re-appropriations are made differently, such as the work of the Pakistani artist Chishty, who resides in the United States and brings her resistance through beauty in her work. The concerns that are presented through the DroneArt are about military power, illegality, immorality, unauthorized surveillance, disregard for borders, no official statement of armed conflict, lack of justice to the families of innocents that were killed in these attacks, etc.. The DroneArt questions with different methods the power of an empire to decide over live and death of citizens that are not within U.S. borders and that are of a different race and practice another religion.

Violence is legitimated most effectively today, it seems to us, not on any a priori framework, moral or legal, but only a posteriori, based on its results. It might seem that the violence of the strong is automatically legitimated and the violence of the weak immediately labeled terrorism, but the logic of the legitimation has more to do with the effects of the violence. The reinforcement of reestablishment of the current global order is what retroactively legitimates the use of violence. (HARDT; NEGRI, 2004, p.30).

In recent years, parallel to the increased use of lethal drones, artists with different backgrounds exhibit artistic works about these deadly devices. They are presented through paintings, photographs, urban interventions, dance and interactive online applications.

The Pakistani artist Mahwish Chishty¹, initiated her career in miniature painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore in Pakistan and in her practices, she started to intensely explore the new media. Her works were exhibited at the Maryland Art Place in Baltimore, Gallery 10 in Washington D.C., Rohtas Gallery in Lahore in Pakistan and also at the Canvas

¹ <http://www.mahachishty.com/BioArt.aspx>.

Gallery in Karachi in Pakistan for camouflaging war machines with modern folk images and iconography. Her work heats complex issues of acculturation, politics and power. Today, she is an adjunct professor at the University of Maryland in Washington in the United States.



MQ-9/Predator (2011) – Mahwish Chishty.

In 2011 Mahwish Chishty began creating a series of works with paint gouache on handmade paper. In the painting *MQ-9/Predator*, the sheet appears to have the same texture as homemade recycled paper, the tonal changes are visible, resembling the color of earth and sand grains, but also nullifies the track of time, there is no way to know the age of this work. What marks the contemporaneity of this work is the recognizable shape of the drone releasing its missiles, but the artist found a way to bring such a beauty that makes us question at the moment we observe the painting about how lethal this device really is. At that moment we need force ourselves that the device is all about surveillance and armed conflicts. Art camouflaged the drone. The conventional metallic gray existent in aircrafts was replaced by light and varied colors that give life to this device. Might be hard to think of a more appropriate and contradictory camouflage than giving life to a drone, giving life to an aircraft controlled miles away, in which was developed to observe, destroy and kill. The colors used are mostly light blue, dark blue, red and orange. The selection of colors and ornaments bring up a delicacy opposed against the original rigidity of the drone. Mahwish Chishty joined the subculture of droneArt after a visit to Pakistan to encounter family and friends that talked constantly about drones on the Pakistani

border. For about ten years, The United States maintains military presence with drones controlling the region to find and aim at “terrorists”, such a word is in quotes because there is no official investigations of the government to determine and differentiate terrorists from male adult civilians. These drone strikes in Pakistan killed over 2,000 people, mostly civilians.

Curiosity about all the propaganda behind the drone war inspired Chishty to re-imagine drones by painting them in the tradition of Pakistan’s truck art. Painting trucks is a local art form created by truck drivers who paint their vehicles in bright colours and floral patterns, often showing artistic depiction of heroes and sometimes with calligraphy in order to beautify them. Chishty juxtaposes silhouettes of drones with truck art imagery, taking the shapes of different kinds of drones and covering them in decoration, like the drivers who decorate their trucks. (PATHEOS, 2013).

She questions herself if her work mischaracterized these war apparatus through beauty. But wouldn’t it be a form of resistance? When she used an ordinary painting technique, she officially brought the drones to the quotidian way of life, showing that the drones have become part of every citizens life, now drones are as ordinary as buses. Mahwish Chishty was interviewed by the online magazine Mother Jones and she said:

It’s kind of a folk art. It’s a tradition, a culture. People who drive these trucks basically live on those trucks, sleep on those trucks. They kind of make that into their mobile home and they decorate it into something that’s eye pleasing. They’re extremely beautiful paintings. They spend so much time on it and they don’t get any funding. This is something that they do, just a personal interest. It has no reason whatsoever other than just an aesthetic sense. I always thought that it was not given any importance in the art world back home, and I wanted people to think maybe that would happen if these drones were friendlier looking, instead of such hard-edged, metallic war machines. (MOTHER JONES, 2013).

Turning to the painting, Mahwish created an area to fit a pilot, that in reality does not exist since drones are about unmanned aircrafts, the frontal area of any aircraft usually refers to the idea of a cabin, this drawing has a white flower reinforcing the dualities: war/peace and surveillance/freedom.

Another interesting aspect of this painting is how the artist composed the missiles. The coloring can be divided into 4 parts from its beginning: red, orange, yellow and white. If we observe only the missiles and take it out of context, it is impossible to recognize it as one. The missile was also camouflaged. About the missile compositions there are two possible readings: in the first there would be six different missiles in different directions, or we could also read that only one missile was fired and we can observe it falling until it reaches the end of the sheet. But,

there is not target, no victim, no blood, no pain. A missile fired randomly, as if its military power was not fatal. Reminding us about the numerous women and children victims of these unofficial and unfair strikes. The artist herself said that she sees these paintings as objects rather than as war machines.

The refusal of the artist to see the drones as war devices and re-appropriate its forms into something simple, beautiful and peaceful becomes an action of resistance against these icons of death and destruction that according to the United States Army, armed conflicts against the so called enemies will be constant.

As described in the Army's Capstone Concept, to operate effectively under conditions of uncertainty and complexity in an era of persistent conflict, leaders must understand the situation in depth, adapt the actions of their formations to seize and retain the initiative, and be capable of rapid operations over extended distances while sustaining operations over time and across wide areas. Developing and integrating UAS into these formations provide the means to broaden situational awareness as well as improve our ability to see, target, and destroy the enemy. We also expect the UAS of the future to contribute to responsive and continuous sustainment in unsecure, austere environments. (U.S. Army UAS Roadmap, 2010, p. i).

Since the creation of photography, we have learned to "see" through machines. The 39 year old American Trevor Paglen made sure people would see the military machine through a machine. In 2010 he produced the photo *Untitled – Reaper Drone*, with this work the feeling of impotence towards the political surveillance is raised. Trevor believes that:

I think that there is a little bit of any irony in the act of "watching the people who are watching you" here for sure, and it's certainly something that I've developed into a sub-theme quite explicitly in some works. But overall, I don't think that particular dynamic is something I'm categorically interested in. That reading seems to emphasize the "surveillance" aspect of the work too much, and I'm actually not particularly interested in surveillance, per se. But it does point towards something that I am interested in, something I call "entangled photography" or "relational photography" – what I mean by this is thinking about photography beyond photographs. What happens if we start thinking about the practice of photography as embodying the critical moment in the work? In other words, what if the "fact" of photographing something is the essential critical point of a work? I started thinking about this a while ago when I was photographing secret military bases and CIA prisons – for me, a crucial part of those projects is not always what the images look like so much as the politics of producing them. (CURCIO, 2013).

The resistance presented by Trevor Paglen is clear, though his images, he reinforces the issue of the legitimization of imperial violence brought by Hardt and Negri (2004, p.30). The use

of drones confirms the idea of an enemy that is constantly present, and when war is at the political base, the enemy has a constitutive function to legitimize violence and attacks. When the enemy is no longer concrete, understandable and traceable, it facilitates the legitimacy of what is actually unsustainable.



Untitled (Drones), (2010) – Trevor Paglen.

Another artist that belongs to the DroneArt circuit is the American James Bridle, he creates a direct visualization of drones by painting faithful outlines in real size in public areas of the city. His interventions shows civilians that pass by these places that such outlines represents war machines and make them wonder. Are we being watched? This kind of urban intervention inserts in our everyday lives the disturbance of military surveillance and the possibility of armed conflict, now we might be under surveillance and at risk of suffering drone attacks just as Muslims are for years. Through DroneArt we are demanded to think about the development of information technologies and also in the evolution of military strategies.



Drone Shadow 002 – James Bridle

To keep pace with the prolific UAS growth, the Army will train more than 2,100 UAS operators, maintainers, and leaders in fiscal year (FY), 2012, which is an 800 percent increased compared to the FY 2003 training quota (U.S. Army UAS Roadmap, 2010, p. 1).

We live in a moment without Great wars, instead there are many small armed conflicts across the globe. The United States present us its military technology through biopower actions. Conflicts grow behind badges, ideologies, religions and races. It is increasingly difficult to understand the distinctions between legitimate violence, crime and terrorism. If the legitimization of violence is not clear, then all violence is within a range of gray colors that does not stop oppressing their populations. The DroneArt reveals the importance of questioning this violence, that approach us as the shadows of the clouds.

In the last three years many DroneArt projects were created to question the use of military drone and also civilian drones. This technology is becoming more accessible to the government, companies and civilians. They are not armed but they are used for surveillance. It seems that the drone technology will not be banned, on the contrary it is becoming a part of our lives, it is our own satellite device. DroneArt artists have also been using drones to express their concepts and ideas about this technology and in this article we will start categorizing them.

Using Drones:

“The Peace Drone”

Axel Brechensbauer, a Swedish artist created the “The Peace Drone” and this is how he presented his work:

“A proposal to United States Armed Forces: Killing foreign people with Predator drones is history. Let me introduce ‘The Peace Drone’. Hoovering over hostile settlements or cities playing loud clown music, smiling around and delivering clouds of oxycontin: a beautiful American drug described as a pharmaceutical grade heroin. Happy people are better than dead people and the best of all, they will be addicted to you!”

(<http://www.mynameisaxel.com/Peace-drone>).

“Charon”

This project was developed by Sterling Crispin from California, he used codes and interacted physically with the quadcopter in a very defined area. Every quadcopter movement was detected by the computer that sent this information to a 3D printing machine, creating a product with an organic shape of the quadcopter’s movement.

(<http://www.sterlingcrispin.com/charon.html>)

“AR Backpack”

Eric Meyer from New Mexico presents his project in the following way:

“For an easily affordable price, the AR Backpack allows user to fit their AR Parrot drones with an aerosol of their choice (...) in contested territories otherwise unreachable by foot, or too dangerous to occupy in-situ. Seen here, the Backpack is loaded with a spray-paint canister, opening for artists a new territory to mark, sketch, paint and subvert.” (<http://www.meyncm.com/AR-Backpack>)

Painting

“Drones as Folk Art”

Paintings created by Mahwish Chishty. (<http://www.mahachishty.com/BioArt.aspx>)

Photography

“Untitled (Drones)” Photos taken by Trevor Paglen. (<http://www.paglen.com/>)

Architecture

“Metropolitan Membrane”

In an architectural context the architects Casey Carter and Jeff Nader proposed the creation of a building that was resistant to the aerial surveillance.

(<http://www.pinterest.com/pin/184999497166774489/>)

“Eco-drones”

Chris Geist from New York found a way to change the eco life in the city. A drone would carry seeds that would be deployed in potential planting areas and according to each surface a different seed would be delivered. (<http://vimeo.com/47476718>)

Urban Intervention

“Under the Shadow of the Drone” Created by James Bridle (shorttermmemoryloss.com)

Dance

“Seraph”

Created by Robby Barnett, Molly Gawler, Renee Jaworski and Itamar Kubovy in collaboration with the MIT Distributed Robotics Laboratory.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTOK8yJhHpo#t=13>)

Clothers

“Stealth Wear”

Another New Yorker developed the Stealth Wear that explores the aesthetics of privacy and surveillance. This ‘anti-drone’ fabric masks the body temperature, reducing the machine visibility. Different clothing was developed but two of them were based in muslim clothes: the scarf and the burqa. (<http://ahprojects.com/projects/stealth-wear#faq>)

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