

A Descriptive Cartography of *Drone Art*: Strategies of Resistance in Military Conflicts

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Abstract

Drone Art brings a broad range of research projects that do not have an agenda in common. This emergent Art brings an opportunity to examine social justice, democracy, and ethical issues, and also helps us to observe the connections between art, culture, ideology and power. Moreover, it also confronts the emergent kinds of armed conflicts around the world. This article is a cartography of Drone Art projects characterized as a strategy of resistance, as a way to criticize the use of drones in military conflicted areas and civil life. In recent years, the controversial use of drones called the attention of artists with different technical backgrounds and nationalities. The artistic products created by them are paintings, photographs, urban interventions, dance, fashion vestments and interactive online applications.

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1. Introduction

After the 9/11 attacks, a constant improvement of remote surveillance and defense systems became central to the United States war against the so called, “world terrorism.” Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts intensified the controversies about the racist use of drones or remotely piloted aircrafts. In a biopolitical glance, the drone technologies, produced by the military force and entrepreneurs exacerbated the racist power over death. Capitalism does not work through exclusion, on the contrary; it needs contact, commitment, exchange, and commerce. There is no society of control (Deleuze, 1992) without worldwide market, and this control is possible if, maintained and recycled with the use of the latest surveillance and defense technologies. In this market, great corporations are responsible for the expansion of weaponry production and capitalize themselves in military and civilian contexts; drones are one of their most recent products.

Over the past few years, artists from different backgrounds have become aware of the controversial use of drones. Their interdisciplinary work defined as *Drone Art*, questions aspects such as military power, illegality, immorality, unauthorized surveillance, disregard for borders, no official statement of armed conflicts and lack of transparent investigation towards terrorism suspects. Drone Art is about resistance, done with different methods, and forces its viewers to criticize the power of an empire that decides over life and death of foreign citizens located beyond U.S. borders. Such citizens are considered of a different race and practice another religion.

We live in a moment less characterized by Great World Wars; instead there are many small armed conflicts across the globe (Hardt & Negri, 2004). Conflicts grow behind badges, ideologies, religions and races. It is increasingly difficult to understand the distinctions between resistance, crime, and terrorism in armed conflicts and civil life. The violence is within a range of gray colors that does not stop oppressing their populations. The same act can be considered resistance, crime or terrorism depending on, who is acting and when is acting, and who is judging who is to blame. Drone Art is an emergent strategy of resistance, a way to criticize the use of surveillance and deadly devices such as military drones in conflicted areas.

Drone is the name used by national and international media to talk about *Unmanned Aerial Vehicles* (UAV) or *Remotely Piloted Aircrafts* (RPA). These aircrafts mostly known as drones can reach anywhere from anywhere on the globe. This technology is often used for surveillance, searching for victims/soldiers, supporting rescue teams, guarding suspects and carrying out attacks. The U.S. Army started using them during combat in 2001 with 54 drones of two types: Hunter and Shadow (Dempsey; Rasmussen, 2010). Nowadays there are more than 4,000 drones of various kinds in the hands of the United States Armed Forces. To attack, the United States tends to believe in the legitimacy of their attack actions as a defense response to the events of September 11th.

According to Hardt and Negri (2004), military power can be legitimized when their function is to maintain order, but not necessarily peace. It becomes 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. Drone Art is a strategy of resistance in this context, but not all projects are explicitly about resistance. In some of them, artists deal with the drone thematic but do not take responsibility for creating something that demands direct and strong reactions from its viewers. Neither put in check biopolitical alliances that guide the selective and racist use of that apparatus in decimating populations.

2. An Emergent Cartography of Drone Art

Drone Art brings an extensive range of research projects that do not have an agenda in common. This emergent Art brings an opportunity to examine social justice, democracy, ethical issues, and also helps us to observe the connections between art, culture, ideology and power. Moreover, it confronts the emergent kinds of armed conflicts around the world. Many Drone Art artists from different backgrounds and nationalities created projects that are worth observing. Based on the Drone Art we have encountered until this moment, it was possible to identify three different tendencies. Moreover, based on such tendencies we have created three categories to approach the Drone Art projects we present in this article: *Inverting Drones*, *Disturbing Drones* and *Coexisting with Drones*. These groups have been established to organize and facilitate the study of Drone Art, observing technical and artistic characteristics, therefore creating a Drone Art cartography. The organization of this text is based on this cartography in which we intend to use and update with the latest Drone Art projects.

In the projects contemplated in the first group, *Inverting Drones*, different types of aerial vehicles were used by the artists that gave them a new objective to accomplish. The second group is called *Disturbing Drones*. The projects in this group tend to be conceptually aggressive, forcing the public to question themselves about privacy rights by presenting new ways to live among drones. The third group is called *Coexisting with Drones*, in which artists use the concept of drone and create new experiences and interpretations about life in the world surrounded by drones.

2.1 Inventing Drones

To be part of this group it is imperative that the artists have used aerial vehicles and not representations of them such as photos or drawings. The objective is to create a new function for this device. For now, we are presenting three projects that fit this category and in all of them, there was an intention to modify the drone purpose, creating a new usage perspective. The projects were developed by Brechensbauer from Sweden and Meyer and Geist from The United States of America.

“The Peace Drone”⁴

This project was created by the Swedish artist Axel Brechensbauer. The drone intervention was both aesthetic and conceptual. A rounded clown facial figure (a very smiley one) was inserted in the frontal part of the drone. Even though the original drone mechanics could not carry weapons, Brechensbauer recreated the military drone concept by using oxycontin as the weapon of choice.

Even though the purpose of the military drone has changed, as it is no longer fatal, the ultimate goal is still intact; there would still be populations considered worthy of punishment, which would come through addiction to oxycontin.



Fig. 1 - *The Peace Drone*

Below is how Axel Brechensbauer 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!” (Brechensbauer: www.mynameisaxel.com/Peace-drone).

“AR Backpack”⁵

Eric Meyer, an architect 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” (Meyer, 2013: <http://www.meyncm.com/AR-Backpack>)

⁴ Brechensbauer, Axel. (Sept. 5th 2013). *The Peace Drone*. Mixed metal and plastics. 40x 17,5 x 19cm. Retrieved January 16, 2015, from <http://www.mynameisaxel.com/Peace-drone>.

⁵ Meyer, Eric. (Sept. 5th 2013). AR Backpack. 2013 Retrieved January 16, 2015, from. <http://www.meyncm.com/AR-Backpack>

The Drone model A.R. Parrot is for sale online, and the price is affordable. A very interesting aspect of this work is the possibility to put an aerosol can in it. It is an appropriate project to be used in cities or countries that are under dictatorship and high surveillance, opening the possibility to express and subvert.



Fig. 2. - AR Backpack

“Eco-drones”⁶

The high-performance seeding drones created by Chris Geist from New York found a way to change the eco life in the city. He used the *FAA Modernization and Reform Act*, which conceived guidelines for the introduction of unmanned aircraft in domestic airspace. He idealized a drone that would carry seeds, deploying them in potential planting areas. According to each surface a different seed would be delivered, reintroducing plant-life to the city and sustainability. Chris Geist created an impressive disruption with this project. There would be eco-cities, which is a political matter in many countries concerned with global warming. This could also be an alternative to farm plantations around the globe.



Fig. 3 - Eco-drones

2.2. Disturbing Drones

The second group in this cartography, *Disturbing Drones*, forces the viewers to access aspects of political dynamics that affect citizens from different nationalities. Questions about human rights and privacy are raised. All three projects, commented here, belong to Americans.

⁶ Geist, Chris. (Sept. 5th 2013). Eco-drones. Retrieved January 16, 2015, from <http://www.experimentsinmotion.com/projects/11/>.

“Drone Shadow 002”⁷

Another artist, that belongs to the Drone Art circuit, is the American James Bridle. He creates a direct visualization of drones by painting real sized outlines in public areas of the city. His urban interventions show civilians that such outlines represents war machines and make them wonder: *Are we being watched?*



Fig. 4 - Drone Shadow 002

This kind of urban intervention inserts in our everyday lives the disturbance of military surveillance and the possibility of armed conflict. We might be under surveillance right now and at risk of suffering drone attacks just as Muslims were for years. Through Drone Art, we are demanded to think about the development of information technologies and also the evolution of military strategies. This art invites its viewers into a space of awareness and resistance by taking us out of the routine, extreme individuality and complexity of the daily visual experiences in which violence has become usual.

“Untitled (Drones)”⁸

The 39- year-old American Trevor Paglen made sure people would see this military machine through a machine. In 2010, he produced the photo *Untitled (Drones)*, and this work raised the feeling of impotence towards the political surveillance. Trevor said:

«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

⁷ Bridle, James. (Sept. 5th 2013). Drone Shadow 002. 2012. Retrieved January 16, 2015, from <http://shorttermmemoryloss.com/portfolio/project/drone-shadows/>

⁸ Paglen, Trevor. (Sept. 5th 2013). Untitled (Drones). 2010. www.paglen.com/?!=biography

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: <http://dailyserving.com/2011/02/interview-with-trevor-paglen/>).



Fig. 5 - Untitled (Drones)

The resistance presented by Trevor Paglen, a political techno-scientific artist, is evident, through his images he reinforces the issue of the legitimacy of imperial violence brought by Hardt and Negri (2004). 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 the unsustainable.

Anti-Drone Scarf⁹



Fig. 6 - *Anti-drone Scarf –Stealth Wear*

⁹ Harvey, Adam. (Sept. 5th 2013). Anti-drone scarf - Stealth Wear. 2013. Retrieved January 16, 2015, from <http://ahprojects.com/projects/stealth-wear#faq>

What if it was possible to buy resistance? The New Yorker Adam Harvey developed the Stealth Wear. It was done to be used in a world in which surveillance technology can find a person through body temperature. The idea of the *anti-drone scarf* design came from the traditional *hijab* used for Muslims, but now the function of the *hijab* is not separating the world from God, instead it is separating humans from Drones. This scarf protects against thermal surveillance, a standard technology in drones by masking the wearer's thermal signature. This garment is lightweight, breathable and safe to wear. Qualities aside, wearing a *hijab* that can protect its owner from thermal surveillance, questions the geopolitics of war directly since drones are weapons usually used usually to select and exterminate distinct populations.

2.3. Coexisting with Drones

The projects in this group create new possible ways to relate to drones. Delicacy and sensitivity are also a common characteristic among the projects in this group. The cartography of *Coexisting with Drones* provides the impact of techno-art poetics. These projects evoke ambivalent reactions, since for some critics it could be perceived as an uncritical assimilation, when in fact, it is quite the opposite. The artists interpolate us: *How can we live with drones? What are we becoming?* They put us in front of micropolitical dynamics of subjectivations, but between intense armed conflicts they end up being in second place in macropolitical aspects.

“Charon”¹⁰

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



Fig. 7 - Charon

¹⁰ Crispin, Sterling. (Sept. 5th 2013). Charon. 2013. Retrieved January 16, 2015, from <http://www.sterlingcrispin.com/charon.html>

“Seraph”¹¹

Created by Robby Barnett, Molly Gawler, Renee Jaworski and Itamar Kubovy in collaboration with the *MIT Distributed Robotics Laboratory*. This contemporary dance spectacle presented a new aspect of drones in society. In this case, it is not about war, and instead it is about a new relationship being built between a human and a non-human. If drones are here to stay, then how can we coexist?



Fig. 8 - Seraph

MQ-9/Predator¹²

The Pakistani Mahwish Chishty presented in a very elegant way, how drones have become a sort of commonplace for her family and friends. Mahwish Chishty initiated her career in miniature painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore in Pakistan. She started to explore the new media intensely. Her works were exhibited in various galleries for camouflaging war machines with modern folk images and iconography. Her work heats complex issues of acculturation, politics, and power. Nowadays, she is an adjunct professor at the University of Maryland in Washington.

Mahwish Chishty joined the subculture of Drone Art after a visit to Pakistan to encounter family and friends that constantly talked about drones on the Pakistani border. For about ten years, The United States has maintained a military presence with drones controlling the region to find and aim at “terrorists”. Such a word is in quotes because there are no transparent official investigations of the government to determine and differentiate terrorists from male adult civilians. These drone strikes in Pakistan has killed over 2,000 people, mostly civilians.

In 2011, Mahwish Chishty began creating a series of works with gouache paint on handmade papers. 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 it also nullifies the track of time, and there is no way to know (visually) the age of this work. What marks this artwork as a contemporary one is the recognizable shape of the drone releasing its missiles. The artist found a way to bring beauty to a lethal device. What would be the purpose of it? The *MQ-9/Predator* is one of a series of paintings about drones. It is easy to spend much time looking at the details, almost as if it was possible to fall in love with those drones.

¹¹ Barnett, Robby, Gawler, Molly, Jaworski, Renee & Kubovy, Itamar. (Sept. 5th 2013). Seraph. 2010. Retrieved January 16, 2015, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTOK8yJhHpo#t=13>

¹² Chishty, Mahwish. (Sept. 5th 2013). MQ-9/Predator. 2011. Retrieved January 16, 2015, from www.mahachishty.com/BioArt.aspx

Does Mahwish Chishty try to make her viewers forget about all the damage that has been happening in Africa and Middle East? While looking at her work, we need to force ourselves to see that it is all about surveillance and armed conflicts. Her artwork camouflaged the drone. The conventional metallic gray existent in aircrafts was replaced by light and varied colors that give life to this device that is 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 in contrast with the original rigidity of the drone.

“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: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mmw/2013/07/the-colourful-drones-of-mahwish-chishty/>).

Chishty questions herself if her work mischaracterized this war apparatus through beauty. She uses beauty as a form of resistance. When she used an ordinary painting technique, she officially brought the drones to the everyday way of living, as if drones have become part of every citizen’s lives. Do drones have become as ordinary as trucks in Pakistan? Mahwish Chishty was interviewed by the online magazine Mother Jones and 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”. (Harkison, 2013: from <http://www.motherjones.com/media/2013/06/pakistani-drone-art-mahwish-chishty>).

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



Fig. 9 - MQ-9/Predator

Another interesting aspect of this painting is how the artist composed the missiles. The coloring can be divided in four 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 composition there are two possible readings: in the first there would be six different missiles fired 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. However, there is not target, no victim, no blood, no pain. A missile fired randomly, as if its military power was not fatal. Nonetheless, at the same time, she keeps reminding us about the numerous women and children who were victims of these unofficial and unfair strikes with the image of the fired missile.

Does 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? The artist herself said that she saw these paintings as objects rather than as war machines, offering us and intriguing contradiction since she was born in a country that people die everyday due to drone attacks.

3. Final Statements

Drone Art conceives resistance through disruption and creativity, contesting and transforming systems of oppression, dominant social structures and power relations. Therefore, creating awareness and resisting hidden forms of power, encourages social, political and ethical transformations. There are many projects under development at the moment, but so far, we have seen artists from England, Sweden, Pakistan and United States. And as Costa (2008) mentions, it is inevitable to notice the politically oriented artists that are engaged in techno-scientific discourses developing these Drone Art projects that are created under the light of multidisciplinary environments.

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