Drone Culture

Artistic Responses to Technological Violence

Few literary works have engaged with drone warfare, but visual artists, activists, filmmakers and craftspeople, such as the weavers of war rugs in Afghanistan, have responded in different ways to the radical imbalance of power and capacity for war-making that underpins drone warfare. Visuality is the primary mode of contestation precisely because the drone is a visual technology: it sees, senses and mediates the world in ways that extend perception into spaces, places and perspectives otherwise inaccessible to human senses. Intervening in the visual regime of drone warfare is vital for deepening public understanding and reframing the debate about its violent costs and traumatic consequences.

For populations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Palestine and elsewhere across the global south, life is increasingly lived under the shadow of militarised drones commanded from remote bases by unseen pilots. More than 9,000 drones have been launched between 2010 and 2015, resulting in the deaths of 7,200 to 10,500 people, including over 1,000 recorded as civilians and over 300 children (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2018). In the same time period, populations subjected to drone violence are left with few effective methods of resistance and vary any recourse to justice. These realities are thus very different from those that confront civilians in states that are home to industrial and technological power. Drones are therefore both a source of invisibility and an instrument of violence, thus rendering the experience of drone warfare invisible to the limits of representation.

Aesthetic works represent, interrogate and resist the radical imbalances of power, technology and capacity at the core of drone warfare. My research investigates how they enable the affective witnessing of the violence and trauma of drone warfare. Developed across my research on affect, testimony and political violence (Richardson 2016, Richardson & Schankweiler 2018), affective witnessing reframes the theory and practice of witnessing to emphasise its embodied and relational qualities. As such, affective witnessing is a valuable framework for understanding the cultural impacts of and responses to drone warfare because it attends to wounded bodies, unspeakable traumas and irreducible gaps in experience without being bound by the limits of representation.

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Pioneers in drone art include Omer Fast (2011) with his video installation, 5,000 Feet Is the Best, which uses whistleblower testimony to place previously impervious American bodies under threat of drone violence. Biome Collective’s (2011) Killbox problematizes the trope of drone warfare as video game war by evoking the traumatic disjunctures in experience of those subject to it. Artist Collective’s (2011) #NotABugSplat is a massive fabric print that disrupts the dehumanising scales of visuality that enables drone warfare. Afghan weavers (2009) show how traditional cultural practices are used to make sense of technological violence and show the variety of forms that witnessing can take. Mehwish Chishty (2015) reworks the materialities of drone warfare to make visible its unseen technologies of vision.