

Creating Killing Machines: On the Relationship between Art and Predation in Surveillance Capitalism

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Abstract

This article explores artistic responses to emergent technologies of surveillance. It suggests looking at the military drone as the paradigmatic surveillant eye and proposes that the primary characteristic of “droning,” or of surveillance as a type of image-creation through algorithmic data gathering, should be thought of as predation-by-aesthetics. This term is introduced as a concise paradigm for the features of surveillance capitalism that this article sees as fundamentally transformative of the world overall: namely the way algorithmic data gathering captures information about individuals and communities and uses it to govern the world through feedback loops that operate at the level of sensation and affect. The figure of the drone sheds light on the way cybernetics has fundamentally transformed the idea of an image, loosening it from a merely optic connotation to a kind of synesthesia. How does the eye of the drone “program” the political potentialities of those it is watching, and can this be harnessed by artists? I interrogate how effective the artistic techniques of camouflage and hyper-visibility are when they try to use the very machines and techniques of surveillance they purport to disrupt. I ask whether, in creating and viewing these works, we become complicit in surveillance networks.

Keywords

Surveillance
Predation
Drones
Data
Vision



The proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or drones for both military surveillance and destruction in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) has also elicited a number of artistic responses ranging from questions about surveillance to the visualization or obfuscation of human casualties.¹ On the theoretical side, attempts to see in “drone vision” try to answer the aesthetic questions of what a drone sees, how it sees, and what its “desires” are.² I propose a specific reading of “drone vision” in order to explore whether the nature of droning can be converted into resistant art at all. Finally, I tentatively engage with philosophies of technology that posit technicity as originary to see whether a changed understanding of vision and technology can shed light on new modes of resistance.

The conjunction of technologies that use cameras and sensors to gather information in order to render visible certain actors, behavioral patterns, or groups for the purpose of control and/or direct physical violence has led many theorists to refer to these techniques of governance as hunting, predation, or trapping. Philip Agre formulates surveillance devices as technologies of “capture,”³ a sentiment echoed by Gregoire Chamayou’s notion of cynegetics or “hunting-power” as the primary mode of contemporary governance,⁴ leading theorists Dan and Nandita Mellamphy to declare: “we thus approach the app not from the perspective of its technical definitions or instrumental uses, but instead from the perspective of its ‘trap’-like operation: apps are hypercamouflaged predatory operatives in their function as covert capitalist capturing-devices.”⁵ This diagnosis can be easily applied to all contemporary networked technologies and instruments, from iPhones to CCTV cameras and Google searches. What these objects have in common is the presence of a camera, a speech- and text-capturing device that performs the function of rendering images or text through the use of algorithms. It is precisely these devices and the images produced by them in the form of photographs, projections on walls, physical objects, and so on that are used by artists to explore life under predatory biopolitics. With the proliferation of artistic discourses on the datavalent state as visibly or invisibly rapacious, I wonder, Is there any camera left that *isn’t* a drone? What is the “technical essence” of the drone? How does drone art and surveillance art by the likes of James Bridle, Zach Blas, and Seda Gürses render this essence visible, thereby making it open to interpretation, critique, and even resistance?

In an article on opacity and aesthetics as political strategy, Blas writes:

Between the antimonies of identification standardization and opacity, a paradox emerges: as capture technologies are intimately bound to the privileges of citizenship, mobility, and rights, those who are either computationally illegible or unaccounted for are excessively vulnerable to violence, discrimination, and criminalization because, unlike the normatively monitored and identified, they are always risks, in that their opacity is not fully controllable.⁶

Blas' art attempts to cultivate the data structures used against minorities by increasing the data density to the point where the datafied collective "self" becomes a mask or camouflage against those very technologies that seek to capture it. In his "Facial Weaponization Suite" (pictured on this issue's cover), Zach uses the aggregated biometric data of groups of people to generate masks that are the embodied representations of the aggregate information used for bio-political control⁷; a form of governmental power which creates and manipulates discourses (e.g., discussions of "security" after 9/11) to manage various populations. For example, "Fag Face" is compiled from the faces of numerous queer men. The masks are unsettlingly inhuman in their contours, with dense, glossy colors and an impenetrable "faceless" faciality. Their smooth, contoured surfaces, reminiscent of entrails, are visceral strategies that position the viewer to see these masks as a person turned inside out. By making faces precisely out of *all* of the biometric data points that supposedly constitute, for example, gay men, the masks play with the idea that the algorithmic persona—or the vision of a person generated through their social media profiles and other metadata—is the true self. The grotesque inhumanity of the resulting masks, with their fantastic shapes, reveals that there is no ideal "Fag Face" through which individuals could be codified and identified. These masks are attempts at becoming informatically opaque or invisible by rendering masks through dense information overload, a technique that is meant to harken to both black bloc political tactics and the inability of facial recognition technologies to identify or render disability, blackness, and other minority statuses. Ironically, it is often these very (non)citizens that surveillance technologies most seek to control. Blas is one of numerous artists who explore the rise of state and non-state surveillance and data gathering through art. Their goals are often to reveal the ubiquity of today's surveillance culture while at the same time subverting the data-gathering machines through some form of disappearance or camouflage.⁸

Other artistic interventions into the informatic society of capture, rather than going invisible, focus on making the systems of capture and control hyper-visible. In “A Dialogue on Interventions in Surveillance Space: Seda Gürses in conversation with Michelle Teran and Manu Luksch,” three artists discuss their attempts to make the networks of surveillance, as well as their effects, manifest for the public at large.⁹ Teran is interested in the way one’s “datafied” self forms an uncanny doppelgänger, and her work seeks to expose the technologies that are constantly watching and recording us in our everyday, banal motions. In a work titled *Friluftskino: Experiments in Open Air Surveillance Cinema*, Teran intercepted images from cameras in indoor spaces such as the local carwash, and projected the feeds onto public outdoor spaces near the original surveillance site.¹⁰ Observers were then invited to sit on chairs and eat popcorn while watching people pass from the space under surveillance to the observers’ space. The indoor space was thereby turned inside-out for public viewing, while the outdoor viewing space revealed the viewers’ own surveillant gaze. Those outside watching were led to realize that just moments before, they were the subjects being watched. According to Teran, “There is an inherent potential for de-stabilization and subsequent strangeness through the introduction of technological systems. This I refer to as a ‘breakdown in narrative’ or having other things taking place that are the unintended byproducts of technological use and are outside the official descriptions of the designers of these platforms and products. I find excitement in this subversion.”¹¹ Later in the conversation, Teran is asked whether she ever becomes worried or frustrated that her use of surveillance techniques and the subsequent immersion of the viewer in the data networks as a result of her work might be an embrace of surveillance rather than a way to resist it.¹² Teran claims she is neither embracing nor rejecting surveillance, merely trying to construct new narratives around the use of media as a whole.

The question of complicity with the network, specifically with regard to drones, is at the core of the question about surveillance art practices. Predator drones¹³ are the archetypal and most extreme example of “Big Brother”—a panoptic eye whose sight can literally kill (the sight of the drone is not only a reconnaissance tool but is now akin to the sight on a traditional gun—that is, the tool used for aiming before shooting).¹⁴ In order to address complicity or resistance, one would first have to construct a taxonomy of mass surveillance. If it is concluded that all surveillance is predatory by default, then our question would be whether such a default state could be changed with use and intention? As Robin James writes in the *Cyborgology* blog, an important distinction must be made between

mere looking, or even cinematic gazing, and drone vision, which is typical of surveillant vision overall. The condition of droning or being constantly surveilled through a literal, material apparatus is distinct from the act of watching, or even from the internalized panopticon, because it produces its own ambient atmosphere: “‘the gaze’ is a visual paradigm...[it] presumes and makes use of all the binaries that structure modernist thought – subject/object, active/passive, depth/surface, authentic/alienated – even if only to deconstruct them into post-modernisms. ‘The (military) [sic] drone’ is a sonic paradigm grounded in neoliberal values and conventions; modernist binaries have little traction; power differentials are cut in more fluid, complicated ways.”¹⁵ James wants to distinguish between the two modes of “watching” at the level of sound—she claims that the distinction is to be made in the ambient *noise*, or droning, produced by the drone. While “the gaze” is indeed linked to binaries of modernity, droning is the primary mode of seeing of all surveillance devices because it seeks to capture, control, and in some cases extinguish “hazy” or datafied doubles. Thus droning extends the very definition of “sight” to include other human senses as well as non-human capabilities.

Instead of being seen as uncanny doubles (as in Teran’s work), the images of the world created using data might be better categorized as “abcanny” quadruples or a series of four interconnected images.¹⁶ The first double is made by a separation between a person and their datafied self, which is defined on the order of topographical patterns of pleasure and consumption. To this datafied self, a targeted response is then issued (by advertisers, the state, etc.). Therefore this initial doubling is constituted globally through people’s willing participation in various networks. But as Blas points out, these datafied doubles are not factual or even plausible manifestations of the people whose avatars they claim to be. Paradoxically, the data double, which is opaque to the real world because of its “mere” existence as algorithmic construction, can be targeted more precisely the more opaque to subjectivity it becomes (where “subjectivity” is understood as a subject of the state). This culminates in the “droning” that characterizes drone vision: the opaque data double is doubled yet again and counterintuitively becomes an image invisible to the state except as the contours of its data suggest. This invisible image determines the fate of the Real (in the Laruellian sense of the term)¹⁷ person either as citizen-consumer or enemy-other. Take the US military’s use of “kill boxes” in the War on Terror: a kill box is a zone of space in which US armed forces and their allies are completely free to fire at anything or anybody inside. According to a 2016 story in *The Atlantic*, “The Department of Defense

uses these to target people whose ‘patterns of life’ fit the parameters of an algorithm, rather than specific individuals.”¹⁸ A kill box can be initiated at any point based on a pattern of behavior that is deemed threatening by an algorithm. The kill box is therefore not a fixed spatial site but an ephemeral one that lays over the landscape and transforms any place into a temporary war zone. These kill zones do not always target specific people; they are indifferent to the *content* of a life. Instead they render a picture of a person based on data generated by certain behavior. Far from a complete image, this caricature then becomes a target to be hunted and destroyed. As a result, drone operators no longer have to be sure that people inside a truck, for example, are hostiles. An activity—driving along a certain route multiple times per day, for example—merely has to fit a predetermined pattern in order for a kill zone to be ordered. The truck could be full of insurgents or it could be a food delivery truck. Civilian casualties are just par for the course.

To summarize: a person is initially doubled into their “real” self and their algorithmic self, then these are both split again by the surveilling eye into invisible actors, comprised of “mere” aggregated data. One of these doubles is always a threatening non-state actor, whose data is collected en-masse by the NSA. The other is a potential buyer being targeted by Google. Though it seems counterintuitive, these are one and the same person, as under biopolitics—which I later refer to as *#datapolitik*—the government is no longer the only power vying for types of control over a population. Google and the NSA have different vested interests in the same digital footprint. The competing “visions” of the same person enacted by companies, NGAs, governments etc., are rendered paradoxically invisible. The drone sees an enemy through “closed eyes,” seeing without seeing. This sight results in the inability of that person to move *freely* through space without being watched and, importantly, analyzed. The foreclosure of the very time/space around a drone’s target may even eliminate the *desire* to escape by extinguishing the distinction between a “green” or safe zone and one that is likely to suffer a military action. Everybody is now a potential target; and per the cynagetic model, they carry their own personal kill boxes with them, becoming prey in motion, where motion is now entirely relative to various technological devices. This transition is important to the distinction between biopolitics and datapolitik, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Drones work by gathering data on behavioral patterns and distinguish who to kill not from the content of their lives but through approximations (e.g. judging that a person is gay based on the biometrics of their face, which are undetectable to the human eye)—outlined speculations

on a future likelihood of aggression based on an aggregated digital persona that is prefigured and then imposed over a tragically malleable fleshy human form.¹⁹ Drones are just the ultimate example of smart technologies that “use aesthetic applications, the art and science of apps, both for protection and for aggression, for attack as well as defense.”²⁰ Artists are harnessing this very potential of art as offense and defense in order to make political statements and create new tactics of obfuscation. Yet if we follow Reza Negarestani’s proclamation that war hunts war machines, is it really enough to use data collection and the imperial eye against itself to duck and cover, to shock, disgust and, in some cases, reiterate the exploitative relationship between the image and control?²¹

In his “Second Treatise of Civil Government” John Locke explains the notion of “tacit consent,” which is integral to the functioning of a law and order government based on the ownership of private property.²² “Every man, that hath any possessions, or enjoyment, of any part of the dominions of any government, doth thereby give his tacit consent, and is as far forth obliged to obedience to the laws of that government, during such enjoyment, as any one under it.”²³ A negative feedback loop emerges between the tacit consent given by proper(tied) residents of a given government and the increasing proliferation of laws that regulate this property. In a post-Fordist economy, behavior is regulated more readily than physical property, and intellectual labor is increasingly more prevalent. In a society where our data and our very image (debatably) constitute property, the government’s power over life and death does not only extend to specific populations but to creating the images of these very populations themselves. In other words, the state and other repressive non-state actors no longer simply maintain or extinguish life but take the very conditions of life and then decide whether to extinguish that life based on an aggregate of images, pixels, and patterns. Biopower has been aestheticized.²⁴ Are we now tacitly consenting to our very creation and destruction without any recourse to the “proper” aspect of property—faceless, nameless, but abounding in the captured imaginary of the Predator drone? In creating techniques of obfuscation, are we tacitly consenting to being hunted? Or, when the state has gained control not only over our movements, births, and deaths, but also over the very ontological conditions of our emergence as beings participating in society (a difficult thing to remove oneself from, to say the least), are we agreeing to the status of prey?

The very core of the question lies at the intersection of the art and technology each of the above artists utilizes and the inextricable question

of *how* such techniques are transformed from repressive to resistant. Honor Hagar systematically articulates the myriad ways art can be political practice with regards to the technological innovations of various eras. She writes that art “reveals the growing capabilities of UAV technologies, but also uses these very capabilities to turn the gaze towards the manufacturers and users of these devices.”²⁵ According to Hagar, this process is achieved through a “conversion” of militarized materials into instructive and subversive art. I certainly agree that creating artworks out of and in response to technology, particularly the omnipresent technology of surveillance and death-from-above, is meaningful and worthwhile. My proposal certainly is not that these artists should stop creating or that their art is somehow ineffective or, worse, exacerbating the issue of surveillant violence by attempting to use these tools against themselves. Rather, I suggest not taking for granted *how* the very same technologies used to repress, control, and kill are “converted” into their positive functions. If the drone is produced through the military logic of hunting and thus turns all the world into prey, by what mechanism (internal to the drone or otherwise) might we fight against or mitigate this hunting?

The perception of drones as predatory begs questions about the nature of drones in general. These questions are often framed in terms of the relationship between the drone and its human operator but do not treat the drone as having its own nature that acts upon its environment. Framing the discussion in terms of machinic desire or artificial intelligence is an unhelpful spectacle that distracts from the human victims of drone warfare. Instead, an inquiry into the ontology of the drone requires a re-thinking of technology and its relationship to humanity. Philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon posited his science of “mechanology” as the study of the relationship between man and machine, which he saw as necessary to alleviate modern anxieties about technology. According to him, this anxiety was misplaced and occurred precisely because there was no adequate theory of technology. For Simondon, technology has always been part of humanity, though its status in the cultural imagination has fluctuated. He treats the technical object as though it had its own evolution and genealogy, which is involved in a positive feedback loop with its environment, including material conditions, scientific progress and human interaction. This environment is called the object’s “associated milieu.” Under this schema, the human is the operator of the technical object, inciting it to act and also to transform. But each technical object has its own “technical essence,” which is a material component central to its evolution along a specific functional chain. “Technical essence is recognizable by the fact that it remains stable

all through the course of evolution and that, further, it not only remains stable but is ever capable of producing structures and functions by internal development and progressive saturation.”²⁶ Simondon gives the example of the combustion engine, which evolved into the diesel engine by means of its technical essence. In that case, the technical essence that was passed down was an increasingly efficient means of combustion that eventually made the entire engine reliant on and in symbiosis with its combustion. This is what Simondon refers to as increased “concretization of function.” A technical object has its essence, which enables it to be transformed into a more perfected, concretized technical object that may or may not resemble the original in form or even function. The important thing is that the lineage of objects can be traced to a structure or process that becomes integral to the functioning of its descendants and gradually eliminates superfluous or compensatory functioning. Thus Simondon traces the familial resemblances between technologies as though they were family traits.

While drones certainly have material components that make up their “technical essences,” it is necessary to push the idea of the essence even further and attempt to theorize the ontology or the being of the drone as a conjunction between its materialistic aspect and its ethos. In other words, we can push the concept of the technical essence into an attempt to trace the genealogy of the concretization of operations unique to droning, which would mean looking at droning as a specific form of seeing and looking at its lineage as a tool for reconnaissance as well as looking at how it has been taken up for both war and as a hobby. As Alexander Galloway says of the interface, the essence of the drone is an ethics—that is, it is a mode of acting. This mode is dictated by its associated milieu and its operation by and on the human. Simondon’s theoretical framework, while immensely innovative, still posits the human operator as fundamentally separate from the technological object. In our society, technology and the human have been thoroughly interlaced; from popular representations of AI in television and film to Donna Haraway’s notion of the McDonald’s worker as cyborg, there is no shortage of notions of an essentially interpenetrative relationship between the technical and the organic.²⁷

In order to cement the link between the technical and the organic as it relates to platform capitalism and surveillance culture, I turn to philosopher of technology Paul Preciado (formerly known as Beatriz). Preciado’s connection between technology, capitalism, and immaterial production will then be augmented with a discussion of big data’s impact on politics and business. Preciado transforms the connection between the

organic and the technical (with an emphasis on the penetrative) and makes explicit the relationship between pornography as a visual technology for managing and producing desire and the prosthesis of pharmaceuticals for producing complementary physical desire. Technology, in both the audiovisual and bio-mechanical senses, produces and interpolates the body and its corresponding subjectivity as well as its subjection to capital. “there is nothing to discover in sex or in sexual identity; there is no inside. the truth about sex is not a disclosure; it is sexdesign. pharmacopornographic biocapitalism does not produce things. it produces mobile ideas, living organs, symbols, desires, chemical reactions and conditions of the soul.”²⁸ What is crucial here is the shift from biopower to technobiopower, which produces and manages bodies but these bodies are now monstrous, created through a pastiche of additive properties that can be removed, enhanced or hacked. Technobiopower is a form of being hacked by capital, and Preciado proposes taking back our biocodes and hacking our own operating systems as a way to resist this mode of control. Preciado’s own experiments with testosterone gel are an attempt to hack the body. These experiments are recorded and combined with philosophical investigations in a way that mirrors Preciado’s newly produced testo-body, an amorphous creation without a blueprint, whose form and function are difficult to pin down with conceptual definitions. Preciado’s text and practice rely on the idea that the technical apparatuses available to us under contemporary capital are both shoved down our throats and taken willingly. It is precisely because Preciado is acting upon their own body that they are acting upon more than the body, because the body is no longer a singular site from which mechanical and affective changes can be added or subtracted; the body is the technologically produced collection of monstrous prostheses, and subjectivity is just one of these.

Importantly, Preciado’s book *Testo Junkie* also equates technologies that we ingest, wear, use and that are used to see and act on us: “In disciplinary society, technologies of subjectivization controlled the body externally like orthoarchitectural apparatuses, but in the pharmacopornographic society, the technologies become part of the body: they dissolve into it, becoming somatechnics.”²⁹ There is no longer a distinction between inside and outside, sovereign and lateral agency or organic and technical, “as if there were a technological maieutic of what is called humanity. The interior and the exterior are the same thing, the inside is the outside, since man (the interior) is essentially defined by the tool (the exterior). However, this double constitution is also that of an opposition between the interior and the exterior—or one that produces an illusion of succession.”³⁰ In other words,

the illusion that technology comes *after* the natural human is due to the forgetting of the origin of the human as “invented.” The technical essence of the human is technology itself. Molecules in hormones are tiny cameras that surveil the body as they move through the bloodstream. Preciado’s worker is literally the consumer, and work itself involves consuming not merely as a process to another end, but as the end itself. What is at stake here is the porosity imposed on people by contemporary capitalism. All technologies are technologies of control and surveillance and all bodies are produced to be watched by somebody. That’s why pornography exemplifies work under this schema; not only is the overt goal of pornography to excite the body, but it also does so through a spectacle created and distributed through a technological network. The act of seeing itself produces the pleasure-value circuit. Like Foucault’s panoptic society, here is a triad of power-pleasure-knowledge, but this new form of vision no longer relies on boundaries, closed architectures, and delineated lines of sight. The technobody of the porn star is processed and travels through the internet, becoming the datafied body that by its mathematically infinite nature resists human cognition. This newly electric body is considered reassembled for the sake of the viewer on the other end, but the porn body now has the viewer in its crosshairs through the production of pleasure. Pleasure has become a form of vision. This is not a terribly abstract idea, either. Each porn site comes with pop-ups for other sites and webcams, and even when you close them, your search history is reflected in the ads on the margins of your email, phone, and future searches, each of which are connected. Advertisers are gathering your data through “windows.” Like the idea of The Cloud, referring to these as windows obfuscates their material nature and paints them as transparent, knowable, and bright. Of course, the algorithms that generate these windows are not transparent at all, but perhaps the reference to windows is not just a misnomer. The issue may lie in the false idea that these are windows for us to look through, out onto something else—onto desire, perhaps. But these windows actually look onto and into us, producing, recording and reproducing our bodies as desiring, thinking and working beings. The window is no longer just a technological medium for sight. It has become a form of sight itself. Technobiopower also distinguishes itself from older notions of biopower in the idea that capitalism is not interested in controlling bodies but in collecting and profiting from excitement itself.

This is Preciado’s take on immaterial labor or affective/platform capitalism, which they connect to the pharmacopornographic regime. Preciado uses pornography in the same way I am using droning in this paper—as a paradigmatic indicator of a ubiquitous state. According to this

paradigm, capitalism operates fundamentally through technobiopower, using digital circuits of attention and affect extract *potentia gaudendi*, or orgasmic potential, which has become the dominant form of value.³¹ Preciado claims that it is no longer strictly pornography that generates this orgasmic force, but all global technologies, because they operate through manipulating excitement and relaxation. Pornography is capitalism and capitalism is pornographic. Pleasure has not only become a form of labor (i.e., a way of extracting surplus value), but has become *the* form of value generation. Surveillance or data gathering is the way by which this value is extracted from bodies both digital and corporeal, since the two are now fundamentally imbricated.

While Preciado's formulation is useful, it does not make visible the full scope and impact of dataveillance, or the ubiquitous recording and gathering of data for future traceability, on subjects or governance. I turn to David Panagia's notion of "*#datapolitik*" and the "algorithm dispositif" to articulate the crucial impact of algorithmic technology on biopower, which has turned governance into dataveillance.

According to Panagia, "the 'algorithm dispositif' regards a dynamic psycho-perceptual milieu participant in the disposition of worlds that at once limits and enables the movement of bodies in space and time offering a digital theory of action that governs our everyday lives. Moreover, the algorithm dispositif is the basis of our 'practices of governance' that today are not simply enabled by algorithms and software; rather, they occur by them in that these non-human agents are our dominant governmental actants."³² Datapolitik operates by way of the algorithm dispositif by tracking and capturing data in order to create a negative feedback loop that uses past data to manage, control and create the conditions for the possibility of new futures.³³ This is what he means by non-human agents having become the primary governmental actors. However, this system is not only one of hunting and capturing data; the behavior of algorithms themselves also makes their targets legible through the overdetermination of information, for example in kill boxes. The droning gaze has transformed surveillance from being a glance at a fixed object, like a prisoner, to the simultaneous creation and eradication of targeted patterns which are attached to real lives. We carry our surveillance devices with us in our pockets, on our wrists, in our cars... Panagia's take on data and surveillance, however, does make explicit the connection between immaterial labor, affective excitement, and data-hunting algorithms. For Preciado, the goal of surveillance capitalism is the creation and extraction of excitation—thus the shift from biopower,

which manages populations, to technobiopower, which manages and mines orgasmic energy. Neither biopower nor technobiopower account for the way non-human agents are integral to the gathering and management of massive collections of data. It is also insufficient to discuss the impact of dataveillance's fundamentally predatory techniques of gathering, which extend back to an age-old imbrication of aesthetic production (and other technologies) with militarization. The fact that surveillance itself is rooted in a history of war comes to the fore with the paradigm of the drone, which is a hybrid of surveillance, predation, and aesthetics (affect and sense).

Blas offers one solution to dataveillance, and he is not alone in proposing it: informatic opacity. This is an elaborate form of camouflage. But hiding oneself does not stop the droning of the drone—the drone still patrols the skies and it should be assumed that its datamining eye will eventually become sophisticated enough to see through the latest disguise. Blas' work also points to the ability of art to engage communities and create new collectivities. The collective is the very condition of the possibility of Blas' masks, since they are an aggregate of the data of multiple persons. It also opens up the possibility of a separate conversation on visions of the posthuman as collective response to capitalist predation. Perhaps forms of resistance to droning will be found in new forms of collective action, maybe a combination of group camouflage (using data against itself) and repurposing the machines of surveillance (using the drone against itself). In order to achieve either, a more thorough understanding of drone vision and the affects algorithmic data has on space needs to be achieved.³⁴ Drone artist James Bridle suggests that only a machine, with its myriad eyes, can watch a machine.³⁵ Hagar points to what might be seen as a prototype of this sentiment in the TRUST-SYSTEM, a technological tool that used military shortwave radio technology in an attempt to send and receive broadcasts to zones blocked by the military. This system "would be mobile, aerial and would utilize the very weapons of war themselves – planes, missiles – to thwart the intentions of the military."³⁶ If the predator-prey dynamic turns out to be the only one possible under surveillance networks, then perhaps aesthetic practice should (and can?) reverse this dynamic through its own human-technology assemblages. Can we build drones that hunt other drones while we watch the aerial combat from below, safe under our posthuman masks?

If techniques of camouflage come with the drawback of the person becoming prey, perhaps Blas' work can be supplemented with Preciado's notion of prosthesis to reconceptualize opacity itself as an ontological

process. *Testo Junkie* already shows us how prostheses should not be thought of as simple additions to an already existing naturalized subject. Under this rubric, gender itself has become a means of biopolitical control precisely through its status as somatic fiction, or constitutive prosthesis. To quote Stiegler: “The prosthesis is not a mere extension of the human body; it is the constitution of this body qua ‘human’ (the quotation marks belong to the constitution). It is not a ‘means’ for the human but its end, and we know the essential equivocity of this expression: ‘the end of the human.’”³⁷ The production of the human itself is fundamentally linked to anticipation as a structure based on a relationship to the future. For the sake of transcribing this system into Preciado’s, anticipation can be thought of as desire. Technology, as prosthesis, creates the human through desire. If this is true, then Blas’ masks cannot simply be removed to reveal the “real” human underneath. How has the mask itself become the essence of the human under Preciado’s technobiopowered society, what *is* underneath it, and how can it be used as a technology of liberation rather than control?

“Facial Weaponization Suite” offers a series of masks that are both satirical and strategic; because they are composed of aggregates of biometric data, they are grotesque figurations of how the face is read by machines. In theory, a facial recognition system improves when it is able to recognize more nuanced and more specific faces—the datafied face is supposed to correspond exactly, and in some cases even more closely, to the real person. A piece like “Fag Face” plays with the idea that machines of surveillance see us more accurately than the surrounding crowd or even sometimes our own friends. For example, Blas’ work plays off the idea that a machine can tell whether somebody is gay or straight by picking up on micro-expressions and facial structures imperceptible to the human eye. It knows more about you than you, more than can be gleaned from a mere photo. At least, that is the premise. However, as Blas’ work reveals, these idealized faces are fictions—they in no way resemble human faces. Again the subject has been doubled—once for the “real” face and once as its biometric iteration. But here also the mere double is not enough. The datafied face, or the grotesque mask *is* a fiction, it is true to the data—but it is a somatic fiction. Here are the monsters prosthetically produced according to Preciado. These biometrics are not mere overlays of how the surveillant eye reads or interprets or represents you—for all intents and purposes, it *is* you. The mask cannot be taken off, because surveillance technologies have no other way of seeing. And this sight is deployed on the human operators who read or look at specific snippets of data. A drone operator sees something that looks closer to a very distant human than to Blas’

inhuman masks, but as was discussed above, the Real of that human target has become the monstrous body. “In *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno, reflecting on powerful technological prostheses, vouched that simply sitting behind the wheel of a powerful automobile was enough to provoke fantasies of wiping the ‘vermin’ off the streets. The viewer of drone porn vicariously experiences a similar thrill as he awaits the ecstatic impact of the missile on its target, which military personnel describe as ‘bugsplat’”³⁸ The phenomenon of referring to victims of drone strikes as insects, bugs, or vermin is common and should not be taken as mere metaphor. If we are to take seriously that the drone operator and the drone form an assemblage, then “drone vision” or the algorithmically produced image of a target (like the image of the internet porn star) is part of and has an effect on human vision. The quote above suggests that the way this machine vision operates on human sight is by turning human targets into insects, turning human bodies into monsters. Here is a constitutive prosthesis, a mask that cannot be removed. “But the real desire to which the name points is the collapse of the acts of seeing and killing into one another, the conferral of death in the moment of visualization.”³⁹ This collapse is commonly understood as being facilitated by the dehumanizing nature of the drone because of its distance from its target as well as its operator. However, the nature of this dehumanization should be thought of as a post- or non-humanization—hence the term “bugsplat.”

If being targeted by drones turns people into insects and facial recognition turns human faces into monsters, then what happens to the person who watches pornography, searches Google or posts on social media? These technologies are prosthetics that make up the human itself and make it into something other than human. Blas’ masks, then, are not merely elaborate covers to avoid the surveillant gaze. They use the very techniques of machine vision to proactively create posthumans from artistic prostheses. In this light, Blas’ work appears as an offshoot of Preciado’s auto-experimentation, or a form of hacking that has real effects on the body as subjectivity. The mask as a tool for obscuring faces is now integrated into the human being using this tool. It becomes not merely camouflage but turns the human into a posthuman that can be modified or hacked further. Preciado’s hormones were messengers that opened the gateway or threshold and exposed the technobody within the body, turned the skin into an interface. The mask functions as the gateway to a humanity that isn’t resisting the surveillance state by trying to return to an earlier, non-technological mode of being. Instead this masked art uses the techniques of surveillance and hacks them through artistic practice.

However, it isn't enough to merely adopt masks or make-up to confuse cameras or dazzle drones. An artistic practice must do more than reveal the presence of surveillance or data mining. Our works of art can be made to camouflage us from a corporate or state eye, but as we have seen, this eye now does much more than merely look. Works like Blas', which make the consumer explicitly *concerned* with the way their datafied selves are being used against them, are vital to connecting aesthetics and politics. This concern reveals the fundamental link between our data and ourselves. When we all see ourselves as targets, we can begin to forge kinship alliances with those communities directly affected by the repressive violence of, for example, military drones. In the digital age, artworks and their creators and consumers become ethical, acting to explore ways of organizing and pushing the boundaries of what makes up community, civil society, and the subject under capitalism.

Notes

- 1 Omer Fast's film "5000 Feet Is The Best" alludes to the optimal distance between a drone operator and their target on the ground. Fast interviewed former drone pilots on the experience of seeing from such a distance. The film asks whether what we see is always strictly speaking "real," and connects the effects of bias, distortion and other factors at play for a drone operator to the beliefs of the civilian population that fuel the War on Terror.
- 2 The artist James Bridle, pioneer of "The New Aesthetic" movement, claims his creation of drone shadows or outlines are interested in the machinic desire of these weapons, while theorists like Dora Apel, in *War Culture and the Contest of Images* (Rutgers University Press, 2012) distinguish between a simply anthropomorphic understanding of machines as having desires with the effects that living in a surveillance society have on the co-existence and similarities between humans and machines.
- 3 Philip E. Agre, "Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy," *The Information Society* 10, no. 2 (1994): 101-127. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01972243.1994.9960162>.
- 4 Gregoire Chamayou, "The Manhunt Doctrine," *Radical Philosophy* no. 169 (September/October 2011): 2-6. <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/the-manhunt-doctrine>.
- 5 Dan and Nandita Mellamphy, "From the Digital to the Tentacular, or From iPods to Cephalopods—Apps, Traps, and Entrées-without-Exit," in *The Imaginary App*, ed. Paul D. Miller and Svitlana Matviyenko, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 4.
- 6 Zach Blas, "Informatic Opacity," *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 9 (Spring 2014): n.p.. <http://www.joaap.org/issue9/zachblas.htm>.
- 7 Zach Blas, "Fag Face," accessed December 10, 2017. <http://www.zachblas.info/works/facial-weaponization-suite/>.
- 8 James Bridle, Michelle Teran and Omer Fast are just some examples of artists interested in the growing use of militarized surveillance technology in everyday life.

- 9 Seda Gürses, Michelle Teran and Manu Luksch, “Triologue on Interventions in Surveillance Space: Seda Gürses in conversation with Michelle Teran and Manu Luksch,” *Surveillance & Society*, Special Issue on Surveillance, Performance and New Media Art, ed. John McGrath and Robert Sweeny 7, no 2 (2010).
- 10 Michelle Teran, 2007, “*Friluftskino: Experiments In Open Air Surveillance Cinema*,” Urban projection A20 Recall, online map and installation, Oslo: Urban Interface Oslo.
- 11 “Trilogue,” 168.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 13 The MQ-1 Predator Drone has been the most widely used military drone in the U.S. Armed Forces for the past 15 years. first being used solely for intelligence gathering by doing aerial reconnaissance. The Predator was then outfitted with laser-guided Air-to-Ground Hellfire Missiles. This easy retrofitting offers a convenient example of the seamless relationship between the camera lens and the targeting scope as they both pass through the military industrial complex. As of 2017, the Predator has been replaced with the even more efficient and deadly Reaper (see Terrell Jermaine Starr, “The Air Force Is Retiring The Predator Drone For The More Deadly Reaper,” *Foxtrot Alpha*, February 28, 2017, <https://foxtrotalpha.jalopnik.com/the-air-force-is-retiring-the-predator-drone-for-the-mo-1792832541/>).
- 14 According to The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, there were a total of 57 drone strikes during George W. Bush’s entire presidency, compared with more than 500 strikes under Barack Obama (the exact number is disputed).
- 15 Robin James, “Drones, Sound, and Super-Panoptic Surveillance,” *Cyborgology* (blog), August 9, 2017, <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2013/10/26/drones-sound-and-super-panoptic-surveillance/>.
- 16 The “abcanny” is a sentiment described by speculative fiction author China Miéville in his essay “M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire Weird; Hauntological: Versus and/or and and/or or?” (*Collapse IV*, ed. Robin Mackay (United Kingdom: Urbanomic, 2008), 105-126)). Unlike Freud’s uncanny, which relies on recognition that one once had a home but is now precisely not at home, (*unheimlich*), the horror felt at the abcanny is the horror of something entirely new, unthought and beyond intelligibility.
- 17 François Laruelle’s use of the ‘Real’ is indebted to Lacan’s term of the same name, but Laruelle uses this term in a radically different way to mean something much closer to the way the term is used colloquially, with an insistence on a Real that unilaterally determines everything in the world

- without being determined by it, outside all representation in thought or language. For an excellent introduction to Laruelle's use of the Real, see Anthony Paul Smith's *Laruelle: A Stranger Thought*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.
- 18 Scott Beauchamp, "The Moral Cost of the Kill Box," *The Atlantic*, February 29, 2016, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/the-cost-of-the-kill-box/470751/.
- 19 According to a 2014 article in *The New Yorker* (Steve Coll, "The Unblinking Stare," *The New Yorker*, November 24, 2014), the Obama presidency used drones in much larger numbers than the Bush administration, adopting a policy of "signature strikes," which regard anybody of a certain age and sex as an enemy combatant without the need for a positive facial identification as a particular enemy.
- 20 Mellamphy, "From the Digital to the Tentacular," 16.
- 21 A paraphrasing of the relationship between War and war machines in the "Exhumations: Relics and Diabolical Particles" section of Reza Negarestani's hyperstitional tale, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Australia: Re.press, 2008).
- 22 John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (London: Printed for R. Butler, etc., 1821, Bartleby.com, 2010). www.bartleby.com/169/.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 For a discussion about the aestheticization of war via the cinematic image, see Paul Virilio's *War and Cinema: the Logistics of Perception*, (London: Verso, 1989). I am suggesting that it's important to distinguish not only between droning and gazing but between cinematic images and media that primarily functions on the level of simulacrum/affect, and surveillance images or droning images, which are gathered algorithmically and operate onto-spatially to program bodies and places.
- 25 Honor Hagar, "Unmanned Aerial Ecologies: proto-drones, airspace and canaries in the mine," Honor Hagar (blog), August 6, 2017, <https://honorhager.wordpress.com/2013/04/21/unmanned-aerial-ecologies-proto-drones-airspace-and-canaries-in-the-mine>.
- 26 Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2017), 46.
- 27 Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 9 Oct. 2017).

- 28 Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 78.
- 29 Ibid., 36.
- 30 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time I*, trans. by Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 148.
- 31 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 42.
- 32 Davide Panagia, “The Algorithm Dispositif: Risk and Automation in the Age of #datapolitik,” academia.edu, https://www.academia.edu/31122041/The_Algorithm_Dispositif_Risk_and_Automation_in_the_Age_of_datapolitik/.
- 33 Panagia goes on to distinguish this from surveillance because, he claims, it does not operate scopically to fix a target in place with a gaze but instead relies on hunting and capture of moving targets of data. He posits algorithmic as being indifferent to the content of data, merely interested in collecting as much of it as possible. I believe the content of the data is intimately tied to the reason for implementing mass data collection in the first place—namely value production. Additionally, all peoples and objects are not being surveilled or predated equally, as the hyper rich and well-connected are usually insulated from this type of collection. The intentionality of dataveillance thus points not to a distinction between surveillance/biopolitics and dataveillance/datapolitik but to a new type of gaze that fixes people and things in place as it predated and captures their data.
- 34 To achieve this understanding, I propose attempting to repurpose Frederic Jameson’s concept of “ontocartography” for the contemporary world by reading Katherine Behar’s work on “glocality” (Katherine Behar, “Capturing Glocality—Online Mapping Circa 2005, Part Two: Mapping Glocalities,” *Parsons Journal for Information Mapping* 1, no. 4 (Fall, 2009): n.p.). Behar argues that online mapping is unique form of mapping through data aggregation works under a paradigm of capture. I suggest this work could be supplemented with Luciana Parisi’s tome on algorithmic objects and digital architecture (Luciana Parisi, *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, and Space*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013)), which contends that algorithmic data constitutes material objects composed of discreet infinities composed of incomputable quantities that literally program the spaces in which we operate. Combining these readings might produce a nuanced account of the affects, intentions and tactics of drone vision.
- 35 Andrew Blum, “Children of the Drone,” *Vanity Fair*, June 12, 2013. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/tech/2013/06/new-aesthetic-james-bridle-drones/>.

Creating Killing Machines

36 Hagar, "Unmanned," n.p..

37 Stiegler, *Technics*, 152-3.

38 Mark Dorrian, "Drone Semiosis," *Cabinet: a Quarterly of Art and Culture* no. 54 (September 2014): 52.

39 *Ibid.*, 49.

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Creating Killing Machines