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Karolina Kolenda

Faculty of Art

Pedagogical University of Krakow

Invisible Violence: Drone Warfare and Landscape after 9/11

Introduction: the art of commemoration and the poetics of absence

Reactions to the terrorist attack of 9/11 have resonated through all forms of cultural production, from film, through literature dealing with the memory and post-memory of the event, graphic novels and iconotexts, to the visual arts. Visual records of the attack, which have immediately filled the iconosphere, from the continuously aired video footage of airplanes hitting the World Trade Centre, which left the public increasingly incredulous rather than contributed to deeper understanding of what happened, to the photographic records of “the falling man,” welcomed predictions about the “game-changing” significance of 9/11 as an event that would mark the closing of an era and the beginning of new types of practice. W.J.T. Mitchell referred to its aftermath as a period of a new type of warfare: “the war of images,” thus highlighting the unprecedented importance of the image in initiating, justifying, and conducting military conflicts (Mitchell, 2011).

However, the last two decades have shown that the practices and artworks with which the visual arts responded to 9/11, in many ways, make it impossible to support the claim that “9/11 changed everything” and invite us to question the initial belief that “nothing would be the same.” This is because many direct artistic responses to the event, as well as the discussions that arose around the ways several different groups proposed to commemorate the victims and the sites of attack, seem to continue earlier debates on representation of the “unrepresentable,” as well as about the “appropriate” medium and form used to express suffering and pain. First, there were two different perspectives on how Ground Zero should be treated, where ambitions to “preserve” clashed with ambitions to “rebuild.” Advocate to the first cause, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, in his farewell address, declared that Ground Zero should become a memorial to the fallen and not site for economic development (Cannavó, 2007: 137). The Port Authority and developer Silverstein have sought to restore the lost 10 million square feet of office space (Cannavó, 2007: 139). The final project is a result of these clashing views. However, it is also a result of highly relevant discussion about contemporary forms of commemoration, with a distinct position taken by the counter-monumental movement

that gained currency primarily in Europe, within the debate of how to adequately honour victims of the Holocaust. Significantly, with its negative form, *Reflecting Absence*, the 9/11 Memorial by Michael Arad, echoes those earlier counter-monuments, particularly Horst Hoheisel's *Aschrott Fountain* from 1985 and Micha Ullman's *Bibliothek* from 1995. With its minimalist negative form, it is also reminiscent of Rachel Whiteread's *Holocaust Memorial* in Vienna (1995–2000).

The same can be said about two landscape design works, one realised at the Pentagon, where Flight 77 struck, another at the site in Pennsylvania, where Flight 93, presumably intended for the Capitol, crashed, killing passengers and the crew. The Pentagon Memorial, by Julie Beckman and Keith Kaseman, is a landscape design, where the site of the crash is covered by gravel and punctuated by 184 benches. Each of them is raised over a small, illuminated pool of water. The design is made complete with maple trees and memorial units with engraved names of victims, which are organised in reference to their ages (Rogers, 2011: 113)¹. The Flight 93 Memorial, by Paul Murdoch Architects, is – on conceptual level – displaying affinities with several projects made after the Second World War. Its integration with the wetland landscape and decision to leave the surrounding meadow uncultivated, expresses the wish to commemorate, but also to heal: “The memorial marks this land as a place of violence and a place of healing and renewal. A wildflower meadow sweeping up the slopes above the Memorial Plaza at the crash site brings colour and life to a once scarred landscape” (Flight 93). This, in my view, resonates with the postwar concept of Open Form, as conceived by Oskar Hansen. Notably, in September 2018, the Flight 93 Memorial will gain a new element in the form of a Tower of Voices, a wind organ commemorating the victims' voices. Despite being an interesting addition, the Tower is hardly an introduction of a commemorating form like no other. Although formally very different, on conceptual level, it bears certain resemblance to Władysław Hasiór's 1966 *Wind Organ*, a memorial to the Communist victims of the postwar civil war, commissioned by the authorities of Podhale region in southern Poland.

This is, of course, not to say that none of these works is an artistically, conceptually, or historically valuable contribution; many of them are. What this brief discussion was meant to show is that a lot of art made after 9/11, particularly in direct response to these events, often invalidates the claim that “9/11 changed everything.” If it did, then perhaps we should look elsewhere. For instance, a lot has been written about how the media changed the way the public takes part, since the invention of television broadcasts, in given events, rendering us all, viewers in front of television screens, into willing or unwilling witnesses. Furthermore, what seems to completely transform the status of the visual media (primarily photography) after 9/11 was brought not so much by the terrorist attack itself, but by the way the visual image was made to serve the interest of the war on terror.

¹ More about the project in: W. Rogers (2011). *The Professional Practice of Landscape Architecture*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, p. 113.

As Nicholas Mirzoeff highlighted, however, the “war of images,” whose beginning Mitchell links with 9/11, starts exactly with the advent of a young, urban, networked global society (Mirzoeff, 2015). This way, the visual scholar clearly suggests that technological development, globalisation, and increased access of the global public to images and techniques of their distribution, were of perhaps paramount importance in the transformation of the role of the image in contemporary reality.

Regardless of its immediate causes, this role did, indeed, transform radically, as manifested by the singular focus put on the photographic and video image as incentives to engage in military conflict. Famously, photographs of alleged chemical weapons served as “evidence” used to justify the US campaign in Iraq. When in 2003 Colin Powell presented to the UN the US reasons to invade Iraq, he supported his claims with photographs of alleged evidence that Iraq produced chemical weapons and made efforts to hide them. Two pictures illustrating the process of “hiding” were put together in a PowerPoint presentation and explained with an attendant commentary. As Mirzoeff contends, this marked perhaps the first political use of this computer programme, whereby Powell detached the everyday “seeing” from the specialised visualisation, telling the UN delegates that the pictures were difficult to interpret for a common viewer, even for himself. The US claims were based on an analysis conducted by experts with years of experience (Mirzoeff, 2015). Significantly, these photographs did not represent the chemical weapons deposited in the bunker but rather the absence thereof; absence which, understandably, could not have been captured on camera. The subsequently published claims by the UN inspectors that the pictures were misinterpreted and the situation misrepresented had little bearing on the subsequent events of 2003.

Another important aspect emerged during the next stage of the war on terror during Obama administration, which can be described as a visual rather than physical engagement of military personnel involved in the drone warfare. The unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), together with other systems of computerised supervision, transformed earlier, clearly defined battlefields, into spatially unlimited areas that stretch far beyond immediate conflict zones or national territories. Another important turning point came with President Barack Obama’s decision to prevent any pictures of the assassination of Osama bin Laden being shown in the media. This marked the ending of the “war of images,” whose major weapon was increasingly obscene and horrifying visual content, and the beginning of a new type of warfare, based on secrecy and distinctly asymmetrical distribution of the power to see, where the “unblinking eye” of drones offers continuous surveillance, without its operators and supervisors suffering almost any consequences of this act of seeing, such as immediate physical danger or direct emotional impact².

² The issue of stress and trauma experienced by drone operators is a highly controversial topic. Recently, more and more information is being revealed about cases of PTSD among involved personnel. Detailed accounts of the training programme, the operations

What interests me in this paper is not so much these art practices that would validate the claim about the game-changing status of 9/11 as an event after which “nothing is the same,” either formally or conceptually. My primary goal is to investigate these examples of visual arts which, coming after the event, have sought to examine how the new type of military conflict, which was brought to life with the war on terror and made possible by the advancement of technology in the early 21st century, introduces a new kind of dynamic of visual engagement of its actors. For this reason, I focus on selected art projects that highlight the changes in how armed conflict has been played out after 9/11 by investigating visual representations of violence. Works I discuss are primarily concerned with unpacking the relationship between violence and landscape, as transformed by the new type of combat techniques, made possible by advancement in military technology. To do so, they converse with the tradition of landscape representation in an effort to explain how new forms of human engagement with the environment, developed in the aftermath of 9/11 and as a result of the war on terror, render the traditional roles of the viewer (or viewing subject) and the observed object both invalid as well as, paradoxically, more clear-cut than ever before. More importantly, however, they emphasise the transformative role of technology in the emergence of new geographies, whose bearing on the way we see and represent landscape cannot be overestimated.

Hide-and-seek: drone warfare and the politics of invisibility

Works that I discuss display a type of engagement with landscape (often aesthetically pleasing or idyllic landscape), which highlights its problematic status after 9/11. What discussed artists manifest in their practice, is that, in post 9/11 landscape, violence is both present and absent, both located in and detached from its immediate environment, experienced first-hand as a new kind of reality, yet mediated through technology to the point where it can no longer be seen, assessed, or opposed.

In her curatorial commentary to the exhibition *To See Without Being Seen: Contemporary Art and Drone Warfare*, organised in 2016 at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum in St. Louis, Svea Bräunert writes about drones that “They are suspiciously absent from public discussion and visual renditions, so that their absence partially manifests itself as invisibility” (Bräunert, 2016: 13). In her exhibition, organised with Meredith Malone, Bräunert brought together a group of artists whose practice in recent years has been focusing on making drones objects

themselves, and their ethical implications, have been given by sensor operator Brandon Bryant, for instance. Many sources emphasise, on the other hand, that operating a drone is much like playing a computer game. See: B. Bryant (2017). *Letter from a Sensor Operator*. In: Parks L., Kaplan C. (eds.). *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*. Durham: Duke University Press. See also: G. Chamayou (2015). *A Theory of the Drone*. Trans. Janet Lloyd. New York, London: The New Press, especially the chapter: *Psychopathologies of the Drone*, pp. 106–113.

of public scrutiny. In so doing, artists address both purely political concerns (the secrecy and deniability of the government's actions, the ethically dubious practice of "targeted killing," etc.), as well as a wide array of problems that arose when remotely controlled machines were tasked with viewing, selecting, and destroying human targets. These problems stem from two major aspects of machine-mediated warfare: one concerns the way image rendered by cameras and sensors supplanted human vision; another refers to the asymmetrical division of the power to observe.

The first aspect has been aptly described by Paul Virilio in his reflections on "the vision machine." Although originally published in 1988, a time before the advent of drones and mass automated surveillance, Virilio's reflections about photography are now even more relevant than they were at the closing of the 20th century. Curiously, equally pertinent in their assessment of the threats posed to human experience of objects by the mechanised vision are comments made by Auguste Rodin one century earlier, with which Virilio begins his book: "If the eye's mobility is transformed into fixity 'by artificial lenses or bad habits, the sensory apparatus undergoes distortion and vision degenerates. [...] In his greedy anxiety to achieve this end, which is to do the greatest possible amount of good seeing in the shortest possible time, the starrer neglects the only means whereby this end can be achieved'" (Gsell, Rodin, 1911, see: Virilio, 1994: 2). In his book, Virilio expresses an intuition about the future of automated vision that finds its exact confirmation in how computed image works today as the fundamental organising aspect of our lives. He speculates on the future development of "visionics," a science developed to achieve "sightless vision," a process "whereby the video camera would be controlled by a computer," and "the computer would be responsible for the machine's – rather than the televiewer's – capacity to analyse the ambient environment and automatically interpret the meaning of events" (Virilio, 1994: 59). This automated perception, indeed, a purely artificial vision, would delegate "the analysis of objective reality to a machine." While this "formation of optical imagery with no apparent base, no permanency beyond that of mental or instrumental visual memory" is, in many ways, our not-so-futuristic reality, it requires a deeper examination in terms of its immediate repercussions. Virilio identified several areas where ethical and aesthetic concerns were bound to emerge, such as "the philosophical question of the *splitting of viewpoint*, the sharing of perception of the environment between the animate (the living subject) and the inanimate" (Virilio, 1994: 59).

Following in Virilio's footsteps and developing his points, Trevor Paglen, an artist, writer, and experimental geographer, proposes to reconfigure and expand the definition of photography so that it accounted for its increasing autonomy in production, interpretation, and storage of images. In his text on "seeing machines," Paglen emphasises the need to investigate the way machines operate by scrutinising what he calls their "scripts," that is "the basic and obvious function of an imagining system," "the immediate relationship (between seer and seen, for example) it produces, and the obvious ways in which a seeing machine sculpts the world" (Paglen, 2016: 52). Although apparently merely an assistant in human endeavour

to make our vision of the world incredibly expanded and accurate, technology, in fact, completely transforms the relationship between the observing subject and the space under its scrutiny. This transformation takes place through the spatial distribution of personnel involved in computerised surveillance. Paglen notes that “The aircraft might be flying a combat mission in Yemen by a pilot based in Nevada, overseen by a manager in Virginia, and supported by intelligence officers in Tampa” (Paglen, 2016: 55)³. While the drone operating personnel is spatially dispersed, making the decision-making process and thereby also acute sense of responsibility somewhat divided, indeed, in some cases almost impossible to deduce⁴, the image of space produced by the drone is at once unified to an unprecedented degree as well as patchy and uneven. This inherently conflicted condition has numerous consequences. First, as Paglen emphasises, the drone produces “its own relative geographies, folding several noncontiguous spaces around the globe into a single, distributed ‘battlefield’” (Paglen, 2016: 55). He compares this process to what Karl Marx described as “the annihilation of space with time” suggesting that seeing machines “are increasingly playing a role creating new relative temporal geographies, perhaps something akin to an annihilation of time with space” (56). On the other hand, the image produced by drone sensors and cameras is unclear and requires “interpretation by experts,” the numerous military personnel involved in a drone strike. It is because the sensors and cameras installed on board a UAV offer focused image of a selected area, which is often difficult or impossible to comprehend in reference to a larger area. Indeed, as Andrew Cockburn argues, this vision was described as a “soda-straw” view of events, “with a visual acuity of 20/200. As it so happens, this is the legal definition of blindness for drivers in the United States” (Cockburn, 2016: 126). Yet, this blind belief in technology, which Cockburn dates back to the US campaign in Vietnam and its largely unsuccessfully and very costly operations in the Vietnamese jungle orchestrated by the Alpha Task Force, makes the operatives and commanding officers involved trust its accuracy to the point of dismissing contradicting information provided by on-site observers. Cockburn’s comments on one of such instances suggest that “The technological architecture in which the assorted participants operated was a tribute to the notion that if it was possible to see everything, it is possible to know everything and

³ Paglen refers here to what after Derek Gregory he calls “drone geographies,” that is a spatially distributed organisation of drone warfare by locating multiple and often insufficiently connected personnel responsible for drone missions in various military facilities in the US. See: D. Gregory (2014). “Drone Geographies.” *Radical Philosophy*. No. 183 (January–February), pp. 7–20.

⁴ Numerous investigations conducted after mistakenly identified targets were bombed often found it difficult to establish the source of “error” and suggested, instead, multiple errors occurring on various stages of the operation, from target identification based on inaccurately tracked SIM card, through image interpretation, to technological malfunctions; the so-called “signature strikes” are known for even higher level of inaccuracy. More on this in: Cockburn, 2016: 7–15, 28.

therefore automate the process of empirical deduction" (Cockburn, 2016: 15). As a result, a fuzzy image requires "informed interpretation." Quite predictably, such interpretation follows a predetermined pattern, ignoring any signs that would question technology's reliability. This way, what Virilio referred to as "the splitting of viewpoint" between animate and inanimate objects leads to the situation when humans, or human operators in this case, tend to rely on coordinates, computed patterns, tracking signals, and heat signatures, thereby consciously giving up the previously privileged position of their human visions. Admittedly, interpretation of computer-made images still requires a human subject, but this intentional resignation from the use of the biological apparatus of human vision suggests increasingly greater trust we have in "seeing machines."

This conscious partial "blindness" of human operators is made use by some potential targets on the ground who develop techniques of becoming "invisible" to the "unblinking eye" of drone cameras⁵. Strategies of visual deception of UAV sensors are also engaged in works by contemporary artists. In her 2013 video work, *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, Hito Steyerl provides an ironic commentary on how sensors can be "fooled" and playfully instructs her viewers how to master the art of obfuscation, emphasising that invisibility can be attained if the nature of technology is used to our advantage: "Resolution determines visibility. It calibrates the world as a picture. [...] To become invisible one has to be smaller or equal to the size of a pixel." The same premise informs Adam Harvey's 2013 series *CV Dazzle*, where photographed models wear non-standard hairstyles and make ups that look rather original and certainly make their owners stand out in the crowd, but are designed in such a way that they confuse facial recognition software and render them "invisible" to the "seeing machine."

The second aspect of automated warfare, which I mentioned above, is the asymmetrical division of the power to observe. Whereas surveillance technologies, such as satellites, GPS system, and CCTV cameras seem to work to our, citizens', advantage and have become our everyday reality, weaponised drones are not something commonly encountered, either in real life or even as a subject of media's scrutiny. This lack of visibility and lack of transparency is astounding if we consider the possibilities offered to us by contemporary technology, software such as GoogleEarth, etc. Tomas van Houtryve has aptly noted that "there is no visual narrative in the public mind's-eye to go along with this war" (Houtryve, 2014, see: Bräunert, 2016: 17). For this reason, some artists interested in documenting the drone warfare choose to connect its visual records with images that are familiar as examples of cultural representation of military conflict. In the context of this essay, particularly relevant are those that also refer to the tradition of landscape representation, and seek to account for the ways drone warfare engages space by investigating its impact upon landscape and its perception.

⁵ These techniques involve wearing reflective shields and cooling down body temperature to avoid being detected by heat sensors.

In his *Limit Telephotography* series (2007–ongoing), Trevor Paglen records military complexes located in the US, removed from the public eye so insistently that their sighting requires the photographer to engage a telescopic camera, which enables him to take a picture from a distance at times as remote as 30 miles. On their aesthetic level, Paglen’s photographs refer to the American tradition of landscape photography. Their purpose, however, is more than merely aesthetic, as their objective is to “emphasise the visual distance of their own making” so that the war is made visible and yet clearly shown in its manifest secrecy. As Peter Geimer claims, this way, photographing the previously invisible can result in the “production of visibility, the generation of an image where there was none or a different one before” (Geimer, 2010: 263, see: Bräunert, 2016: 17). These works pose important questions about the striking contrast between what the state knows about its citizens, and what we know about its operations. More important, however, in the context of this paper, is how they challenge the tradition of landscape representation in a number of different ways, starting with the privileged position of the viewing subject. Military facilities are hidden from the viewer through the natural limitations of the human eye. They simply refuse to be seen. They also challenge the typically romantic traveller’s wish to see and record what has not been seen before, to appreciate the magnitude of nature in complete solitude. Paglen describes how during his work he was accompanied only by drones, whose shadow – in a different landscape and in different circumstances – would probably be the last thing he would see. Normally, seeing is reserved for the drone only. And rather than merely seeing, drone is potentially also targeting. As Grégoire Chamayou writes, “vision is a sighting: it serves not to represent objects but to act upon them, to target them. The function of the eye is that of a weapon” (Chamayou, 2015: 114, see: Bräunert, 2016: 21).

While the targets of drone operators become exposed to the all-seeing eyes of cameras and sensors, operators themselves are safely removed from danger, remote from the arena of war by way of physical distance that separates them from the areas where drones make their flights, as well as through the distance afforded by the intermediary of the interface. This aspect is aptly represented in Rune Peitersen’s video work from 2017, *The Operators and the Targets*. In the film, the visual asymmetry of the war – the shocking inequality in the distribution of the right to see – is poignantly juxtaposed with the emotional impact of warfare on both sides: on targets, operators, and their respective families.

The military sublime: from absence to invisibility

Particularly significant for the shaping of the modern image of the war was the Romantic notion of the sublime. However, although the sublime, as an experience of awe in the face of a phenomenon of colossal nature, whose magnitude produces in the viewing subject a strong emotional reaction that reason then turns into

contemplation of infinity and grandeur, seems to accurately define how our culture has pictured military conflicts in modernity, mixing fascination with terror; in fact, war does not easily fit into the frameworks of the sublime, as outlined by the classic definition of the term.

Notably, in his *Analytic of the Sublime*, included in *Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant fails to accommodate war within the realm of the sublime (2007: 85–93)⁶. Patricia Anne Simpson suggests that, despite his efforts, the German philosopher is unable to explain war in terms of the sublime due to the “state of joy” that ensues when reason introduces controlled appreciation of perceived magnitude in place of earlier powerfully emotional experience. “Pleasure,” Simpson argues, “is the crucial component of the sublime experience, provided in part by the security of the subject from any danger” (2006: 40). Due to the fact that war fails to offer such security and therefore provide a source of “pleasure,” it refuses to conform to Kant’s system, even that idealised type of war “conducted with order and a sacred respect for the rights of civilians,” which he saw as a power able to inspire commendable behaviour (2007: 93). In his *Critique of Judgement*, Alex Houen claims, Kant, in fact, “outlines his own cognitive war against terror: terrifying nature must be converted into personal rational security, just as suffering (the faculties’ initial discord) is converted into hard-won ‘pleasure’” (Houen, 2007: 254). The wars of the 20th century, with their immediate impact on civilian populations and the tactic of provoking panic and chaos, would find no entry into this ordered system.

In his postmodern reading of Kantian aesthetics, Jean-François Lyotard developed the notion of the sublime in terms of an unresolvable conflict between perception and comprehension: “We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to ‘make visible’ this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate” (1984: 78). For the French thinker, this quality of indefiniteness, particularly in the context of abstract painting, was welcomed as a portent of openness. However, when referred to other images, such as footage of the 9/11 attacks or the visually elusive nature of the war on terror, it takes on an entirely different aspect. Edmund Burke, in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, expressed reservations about the “security” of sublime experience when an individual’s reason is not strong enough to endure terrifying objects (1889: 101)⁷. Writing about the sublime in the reality of the 21st century and its globalised, networked society, Houen links Burke’s arguments with Fredric Jameson’s claims about technology,

⁶ Kant writes: “War itself, provided it is conducted with order and a sacred respect for the rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, and gives nations that carry it on in such a manner a stamp of mind only the more sublime the more numerous the dangers to which they are exposed, and which they are able to meet with fortitude” (2007: 93).

⁷ According to Burke, “pain and terror” need to be modified so that they are not “actually noxious” (1889: 101). Alex Houen emphasises that if “the force of the sublime is too strong, it can produce an obsessive derangement in individuals” (2007: 254).

that it can only be theorised through the category of the sublime (Jameson, 1991: 38), and argues that, at present, “Unable to seek refuge in one’s own super-sensible realm, individuals have to look outside themselves for such security and power. Technologised networks are one possibility in contemporary culture, aimed as they are at ordering things, events and experience into supposedly rational systems” (2007: 254)⁸. However, ironically enough, these networks are increasingly complex so that “individuals are incapable of comprehending the ways in which they are caught up in them” (2007: 254). This way, the initial terror can never be transformed into pleasure; fear never turns into the sublime, while the sublime itself “remains rooted in trauma” (2007: 254).

Visual records of 9/11 and its aftermath offer a powerful confirmation of the contemporary shift of the sublime towards the traumatic, which is effected by the *immensity* and truly ungraspable size of the war on terror, indeed, an impossibility to imagine its parameters, such as geographical scope, legal ramifications, or actual number of casualties. The facts of this war are, in many ways, so obscure that it is difficult to pinpoint an object or image that triggers the sense of terror; rather, it comes from the absence thereof, while its impact is, nevertheless, deeply felt. In contemporary art, attempts to create visual testimonies to this problematic nature of warfare come in many different guises, with some artists channelling the traditional aesthetics of the sublime in an effort to highlight the ensuing discrepancies in what the image shows and what it actually depicts.

Photographs by Simon Norfolk, for instance, who uses old-fashioned wood and brass field camera, play with the tradition of war photography both in their technique and in their aesthetics⁹. In the series *Afghanistan: Chronotopia*, Norfolk records ruins of warfare, which, in his rendition, refer the viewer to the European landscape tradition¹⁰. Here, as Norfolk claims, “the landscape of Afghanistan is also ‘awesome’ (in the original sense of this word), but the feelings of dread and insignificance are not related to the power of God but to the power of modern weaponry” (Norfolk). In an interview, the photographer describes his efforts as trying to show war not so much as the agent of ruination; he sees it as something that is even beyond human agency. As Tim Connor suggests, “Looking at

⁸ Jameson wrote about technology that is represents “that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labour stored up in our machinery – an alienated power [...] which turns back on and against us in unrecognisable forms and seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis” (1991: 35).

⁹ More on Norfolk’s technique in: A. Danchev (2009). *On Art and War and Terror*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 41.

¹⁰ The title of the series, “chronotopia” comes from Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of places where space and time seem to mingle, places that manifestly display the “layeredness” of time. In Afghanistan, because of prolonged conflict, ruins of bombed buildings, left-over military equipment, and stretches of land swept by landmine removing squads, suggest exact dates of particular remains: the 1980s, 90s, and recently.

them [ruins – K.K.] – as *aftermath* – goes beyond the catharsis of human identification with war's futility and loss. Outside time, the photos suggest something even darker – that war is larger than human concerns. It may even be beyond human control" (2007). In this context, Norfolk's interest in the sublime and in representation of ruins is an expression of his trying to make sense of the nature of contemporary warfare: entire countries as battlefields, entire countries as ruins. He says of his engagement: "It ends up being like a relationship with the sublime – a military sublime [...]. Because these objects are beyond: they're inscrutable, uncontrollable, beyond democracy" (Norfolk, 2007, see: Connor, 2007). In Norfolk's pictures, the violence of war, even though so recent, is observed *after* it had occurred and therefore experienced (by the artist) already as long absent, since ruins, which modern warfare produces so swiftly and effectively, are culturally embedded as chronologically remote from us¹¹.

Although the effects of war, the ruins it leaves behind, permanently transform the landscape and the lives of people who inhabit them, being poignant reminders of its presence, the violence itself, for a viewer overseas, is virtually invisible. This is not to say that it is immaterial. But the fact is that the use of drones, which can be heard rather than seen, makes the violent act they perform partly intangible (the more so that the act itself is not *really* performed by either the drone or by a single person behind the drone, but dispersed between pilot, sensor operator, and several other actors involved in a strike). Trevor Paglen renders this elusive presence into visually compelling pictures in his series *Untitled (Drones)* from 2010. Paglen is interested in how increasingly covert operations of the military during the war on terror translate into growing difficulty of recording them on camera. Hence, the series presents visually attractive pictures of the sky with only the subtlest traces of drones visible. In a very telling comment, Paglen said: "For me, seeing the drone in the 21st century is a little bit like Turner seeing the train in the 19th century" (Paglen, 2017, see: Adams, 2017). This is, then, of no coincidence that his photographs channel the aesthetics of the sublime. Colourful shots of the sky make clear references to the dramatic renditions of the sky painted by the great Romantic artist. Turner's famous painting, *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway* (1844), dating not long after the aesthetics of the sublime embraced developing technology and gave rise to what is termed the technological sublime¹², was inspired by the artist's journey on the train, when he famously put his head outside the window, but remained in the safety of the carriage. The terrifying effect of the train rushing through the rain was then transformed, in the artist's studio, into a "pleasurable" image. Although Turner's experience did contain elements

¹¹ Significantly, Norfolk's photographs do not feature human figures, which evokes a postapocalyptic atmosphere of pictured places as always-already ruined and depopulated. More on Norfolk's reasons for avoiding human subjects in his representations of war in: Biernoff, 2017: 38–39 and Roberts, 2014: 109–110.

¹² More about the technological sublime in: Nye, 1994.

of apprehension about the rapid development of technology and its immediate threats, which made the sublime in his painting verge towards its modern, conflicted form, still the relative safety of the viewing subject (the painter) works to secure it in the confines of an aesthetic experience. Paglen's photographs of drones, in contrast, refuse to admit such possibility; in them, danger is both invisible and oppressively present, while the terror of this situation evades representation.

Conclusion

Works I discussed in this paper are merely several examples of a great variety of cultural production that seeks to examine the ways our perception of reality and, indeed, our reality as such, have changed in the 21st century. As indicated in the beginning, the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terror are seen either as causes of this change (primarily on geopolitical level), as well as results thereof (particularly in areas such as military technology and warfare strategy). Artworks that attempt to investigate this new reality, and which make landscape their major focus, reveal important aspects of this change. One is that the image of landscape, which, historically speaking, has always been made for reasons to a great extent linked with military power, conquest of new lands, and their subsequent control, is increasingly often produced, perceived, and analysed by machines, without ever reaching the eyes of a human viewer. Once maps were being made for political leaders and merchants to favour their interests, making an impact on how space was imagined in art; the invention of aerial photography marked the first step towards machine-mediated vision of landscape, yet still the human viewer was central for its production; with the development of "seeing machines" looking at landscape (primarily for scientific and military purposes) is delegated to "other eyes," while effects of their "seeing" are often never reported back to the human viewer in forms other than numerical data. Another important aspect of discussed change is the shift of perspective from horizontal to vertical. Admittedly, photographs taken from airplanes and satellites "lifted" our vision to heights previously unknown, yet the ultimate goal of that was still to map and imagine how elements of our material environment were distributed *on* the Earth's surface rather than above it. 21st-century mapping technology, including drones, Google Maps, etc., privilege vertical vision: looking from a more or less defined "above". As Hito Steyerl writes, this "view from above" carries a double threat, being both "a proxy perspective that projects delusions of stability, safety, and extreme mastery onto a backdrop of expanded 3-D sovereignty," at the same time recreating "societies as free-falling urban abysses and splintered terrains of occupation" (Steyerl, 2016: 79). In discussed works, technological and military underpinnings of contemporary perception of landscape is confronted with historically sanctioned ways of seeing. The way artists draw on the aesthetic notion of the sublime shows that an artistic juxtaposition of "cold" mechanical mapping

with emotional-turned-aesthetic experience of landscape is able to reveal the vital aspects of technologically-transformed perception of space, one of them being its gradual disappearance effected, paradoxically, by its increasing visibility.

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Invisible Violence: Drone Warfare and Landscape after 9/11

Abstract

The paper investigates representations of landscape in selected examples of contemporary artworks that were produced in the aftermath of and in direct response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent war on terror. Focused on the work of Hito Steyerl, Trevor Paglen, and Simon Norfolk, the paper seeks to examine how the development in military technology, primarily the increasing reliance on computerised vision, as manifested by the use of drones, has generated new ways in which landscape is perceived and represented, experienced and mediated. In the text, discussed artworks are shown to confront the mechanised vision of landscape with aesthetic concepts such as the sublime in order to account for the changes in human experience of space in the 21st century.

Keywords: invisibility, drone warfare, landscape, art after 9/11

Słowa kluczowe: niewidzialność, drony, krajobraz, sztuka po 9/11

Karolina Kolenda – is an art historian and literary scholar. She studied at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. Her research interests are focused on British contemporary art and literature, landscape studies, and cultural geography. She is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Art at the Pedagogical University of Krakow.