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‘The Forensic Architecture Project: Virtual imagery as evidence in the contemporary
context of the war on terror’

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Abstract

This paper explores the evidentiary role of virtual reproductions in the context of the contemporary battlefields of the war on terror produced by the research project Forensic Architecture. The digitization of war has created a networked landscape whose processes often remain invisible by the public. Although drone operations and the tactic of targeted assassinations by the CIA depend largely on advanced visual reproduction technologies for engagement, there exist almost no resulting visible evidence of their fallouts. Evidentiary images through the traditional medium of photojournalism are rare due to members of the media being unable to access areas of drone attacks and the highly enforced fatal risks towards local journalists who document any evidence of drone attacks. This has led to a war waged without visual evidence thereby creating a regime of unaccountability for the human collateral damage caused by the attacks. In response to this the team of architects, artists and theorists of Forensic Architecture piece together witness accounts of drone attacks through virtual imagery that function as a new visual form of testimony and document. This paper explores how the role of virtual image production is utilized as evidence providing for visual evidence where there was none. I will look at the digital production processes of the virtual image as a new visual syntax of document, which reasserts the temporal and spatial experience of the witness. The result is a form of reverse image, which counters the production of the drone image.

Paper

One of the formative conditions of CIA lead drone warfare is its ability to wage war unseen. The digitization of war has created a networked landscape of which its processes often remain invisible by the public. Although drone operations depend largely on advanced visual reproduction technologies for engagement, there exists almost no visible evidence of their attacks.

Recent published reports by Human Rights organizations describe detailed investigations by their researchers into civilian casualties and the trauma of people living under CIA drones, in the areas of Yemen and Pakistan. The CIA have neither confirmed nor denied their involvement in these drone operations. This politics of negation relies on a mechanism of ‘negative evidence’, that is, that the absence of material evidence *is* evidence in and of itself. To be made evident is to be visible. Within this context, I argue that image production

operates as an extension of political rhetoric, where the *absence* of images supports an asymmetrical political power structure, which allows CIA drones to operate without accountability or punity. This is an example of a form of visuality as defined by Nicholas Mirzeoff, as an exclusive claim to the right to look, a visuality which functions as a weapon in and of itself, suturing authority to power.

The role of advanced visual technologies within drone warfare has had a wider effect on altering perceptions of space and time. Sense of physical and territorial space transform when the contemporary theater of war is directed by the global scope of the drone's lens and where the physical mobility of combat soldiers *to* the battlefield is replaced by the mobility of images from the battlefield to the soldier. Time as Paul Virilio has described, becomes corrupted in this temporal dynamic of so-called 'real-time' video. Rather than the three tenses, past present and future, in 'real-time' there are only two tenses: real and delayed. Image production as understood in this context of drones, has had an increasingly complex and dynamic role in organizing our relationship to events.

Forensic Architecture is a project established in 2011 at the Center for Research and Architecture at Goldsmiths College started with the belief that 'transformative politics must begin with material issues'. Its members include architects, artists, filmmakers, and theorists. The work they produce interrogates ways in which new types of evidence can affect political and legal processes. Police forensics are used traditionally to affirm the power of states, on the other hand Forensic Architecture is primarily motivated to detect and interrupt state violations through inverting the forensic gaze.

I will show two case examples of work produced by Forensic Architecture. These film clips, which, I have edited, depict the processes they use to create virtual models, which reconstruct the events surrounding a drone attack. As you will see they cross reference details of the attacks with witness testimonies, press reports, satellite imagery and local expertise.

[START FILM CLIP]

The first example is titled 'The architecture of memory' which depicts a virtual reconstruction of a drone attack in Mir Ali, North Waziristan that occurred on October 4, 2010. This reconstruction is lead by a witness of the event, a woman who wishes to remain anonymous who now lives in Germany. The reconstruction took place on May 21st, 2013, three years after the event. The woman sat for a day-long process building a digital model of her previous home, which was the site of the drone attack. Through the virtual model she was able to remember all the architectural elements of her home, including placements of furniture and personal belongings. As you can see the reconstruction process allows for various different angles and perspectives, including both the drone perspective as well as on the ground. After reconstruction of the home was complete, they were able to reenact the events of the day the drone strike occurred. The witness could recall the movement of people throughout the house that day. She was able to recall her own movements after the attack occurred. She could remember the placement of the rubble and ruin which was left after the attack. Including the material of the rubble. Through first person on the ground perspective including 360-degree views, the witness reconstructed the day after the attack. She remembered collecting body parts to be buried that were stuck on a fan, which was left in the

courtyard. This virtual model in its spatial construction, acted as temporal marker, in which the witness could remember the events leading up to the attack, the attack itself, as well as the events of the day after. Placed virtually within the time and space of the event, this construction of the virtual model was used to organize the witness' memory. She was able to remember things that she couldn't, previous to the construction of the model. It allowed her to fulfill her desire in communicating a reality of living under drones.

The virtual model is said to be the domain of the future as photographs are the domain of the past, recording events that have already occurred. Yet, in this example of the virtual model, temporal positions become crossed and overlap, as it is a product of both the past, in the witness' recollection, as well as of the future, in its existence as possible evidence, to be seen and used in a public forum.

The second example contrasts from Mir Ali, in that it is a virtual reconstruction of a drone attack with the aid of some actual video footage of the destruction of an attack, which was able to be smuggled out of Pakistan. The attack occurred in Miranshah, North Waziristan on March 30, 2012. In this case, since they had actual documentary footage of the destruction, they had more information to work with, primarily that of light and shadow. [START VIDEO CLIP] From piecing the video clips together to produce a panoramic view of the destruction, matched against satellite imagery, members of Forensic Architecture could locate the exact street within Miranshah, where the attack occurred. They analyzed the shadows of the video footage to formulate spatial features and make out the morphology of the roads. They then constructed a virtual model of the buildings based on satellite photos of the street. They constructed a before and after virtual model. They animated shadows across the surface of the model that was cast on different days and different times of the day in order to compare it with the shadows visible within the satellite images and video images to corroborate its volumes. Guessing that the footage was taken shortly after the attack, they were able to approximate the time of day that it was recorded.

The second clip from this same case, is constructing a virtual model of a room in which a hellfire missile from a drone was believed to have landed. [START VIDEO CLIP] They used colored tracking points from the footage of the room and reconstructed the size and proportions of the 3 dimensional space. They referred to photos taken of impacts through ceilings by hellfire missiles launched from drones to corroborate the size of impact in the ceiling of this room. The footage of Miranshah, depicted smaller holes visible in the ceiling. Each of these holes are smaller than a 50cm square, which is the size of what a single pixel depicts in publically available satellite images. Impact holes made by drones are thereby below the threshold of visibility for the low resolution of publically available images. Eyal Weizman, one of the members of Forensic Architecture, has referred to this discrepancy as the 'politics of the pixel.' Again, working with light and shadow, they used the light that streams through the impact holes as a compass to enable them to find the orientation of the room. The position of the sunspots helps to verify the location of the room on the right side of the building. They then analyzed the distribution of the fragments of shrapnel on the walls of the room. They can see the density of the fragments in certain areas of the wall. Wherever there is low density, it is likely that something absorbed the shrapnel. Although they cannot

be certain, it is likely where there is absence of fragments; it indicates where people may have died. In this case, the wall within the footage acts as an index to a murder scene, the visible trace of where a person stood. The processes of this virtual model reconstruction interprets both the spatial parameters of the drone attack as well as temporal position of its recording of its destruction: In watching it, it places the viewer within the room of a drone attack, able to observe a narrative through animating the indexical clues found within the video footage.

The virtual model as evidence, produced within these two examples operate as a new visual syntax, which reasserts the spatial and temporal experiences of the witness. Rather than the distance of an aerial perspective, these images provide for multiple perspectives, actively immersing the viewer into the experience of the witness. As a product of witness testimony I argue, that these virtual models result in a form of reverse image production, directly countering the production of the drone image.