

Large Text

Overt: Militarization as Ideology

Curated by Fatma Yehia

Works by Harun Farocki, Hajra Waheed,
Hiwa K, James Bridle, Lawrence Abu Hamdan,
Lamis Haggag

October 28–November 21, 2020

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University of Toronto Art Centre

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Exhibition Essay

In English, the word “military” primarily refers to the armed forces of a country, and often points to the role played by the army. In Arabic, the translation of the word “militarization” yields a verb and a noun, which can mean strength or to strengthen, gather or collect, camp or settle down—the military and its society and the redundancy of a thing.

With the start of the “war on terror” and the proliferation of militarized technologies, many artists developed new aesthetic approaches to explore military sites and industries. The exhibition *Overt* focuses on the ways in which artists have engaged aesthetically with the concept and condition of militarization. It highlights the human-technological relationships that have been amplified due to the ever-intensifying intrusion of military research in everyday life. The artists included in *Overt* urge us to think of

militarization beyond military deployment, war, and conscription and underline the urgency to examine its ideological impact on culture and society. They interpret, theorize, and represent militarization from their perception of or direct experience with military technologies, industries, and systems.

The complexities of military-civilian relationships take visible forms during war and often become invisible in peaceful times and spaces. For instance, the transformation of what is now the ubiquitous technology of TV production from glitchy images to mass entertainment emanated from military attempts during WWII to fix cameras on targeted missiles and drones.¹ Advanced automation, originally developed by military research to replace and protect combatants in the battlefield, now infuses everything from computers to camera drones and perhaps even all conceptions of the future—for example, the invention of drones and their infiltration of the civilian market.² This exhibition asks: What becomes visible or remains invisible when it comes to representing militarized technologies? Is the relationship between military and civil worlds one of discontinuity or deep entanglement? Are military technologies oppressive or can they be emancipatory?

Harun Farocki is known for his explorations of the societal ramifications of war, industry, and technology. In *War At A Distance*, Farocki interweaves the relations between US military facilities during the first Gulf War and European industrial factories in the twenty-first century. The historical narrative in the film elucidates not only the connections between military and industrial production but also the links between destruction and creation in light of their increased distance from human agency.

Hajra Waheed's *Signed R.E. Moon 1-24* focuses on the human perception of invisible militarization. Each signed page in this series of technical drawings by "para-fictional" persona R.E. Moon depicts reconnaissance satellite parts on original mechanical drafting paper from the Douglas Aircraft Company—the American aerospace manufacturer that became McDonnell Douglas, one of the US government's primary sources for military technologies during the Cold War. Waheed's work explores the partial and fragmented histories revealed through classified evidence while signalling towards the volume of covert data in our contemporary national-security states.

James Bridle scrutinizes the overlaps between history and the future in an ambiguous world where artificial intelligence takes over humanity. Questioning humanity's interactions with the technology it invented in *Se Ti Sabir*, Bridle critically imagines our future as human beings and our desire to find ways of communicating with other, non-human species. Bridle explores our disconnect from the devices and machines we have created and define as "intelligent," suggesting that we cannot envision a plausible affinity to them.

Lawrence Abu-Hamdan is interested in forensics as aesthetics. In *Walled Unwalled*, he places the viewer in two different realms, a simultaneous investigation of what is violent and what is aesthetical. Reckoning with violent incidents, the work is visually and acoustically immersive, creating a setting that subtly mimics a GDR prison. Abu-Hamdan questions the role of borders and walls as means of protection, as well as the efficacy of incarceration, criminal investigation, and constitutional debates. He also demonstrates that militarized technologies have infiltrated and controlled societies, in all parts of the world.

The relationship between the military and civilian

realms takes another form in Hiwa K's *View From Above*, which emphasizes the faith humans have placed in machines and systems rather than their own kind. The EU asylum system uses images generated by drones and GPS to classify safe and unsafe zones in Kurdistan and Iraq, granting asylum in European countries only to those applicants who can prove they come from an unsafe zone. Capturing the discrepancy between the view taken from a distance in the aerial image and the lived reality from a citizen's view in the city of Kurdistan, Hiwa K's work is a poetic critique of a system that trusts an aerial image but not a human narrative to decide what makes a person safe.

The proximity of military technologies prevails in Lamis Haggag's installation, *Structural Ambiguity*, which integrates deep learning and language coding to understand the structure of language. Using Google Cloud Speech to build up an analogy between English and Arabic, Haggag raises questions about how we may reconfigure militarized technologies to understand the discontinuity of language and identity.

This exhibition interweaves two worlds, the Middle East and the West, and their different interpretations of militarization. Starting from the

linguistic difference between English and Arabic in defining militarization, this exhibition urges its visitors to think of militarization as an ideology shaping our lives in multiple parts of the world.

—Fatma Yehia

¹ Harun Farocki, *War At a Distance* (2003), documentary film.

² Adam Rothstein, *Drone* (New York: Bloomsburry, 2015).

Curator's Acknowledgements

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To my loving son Saif—you are the fuel of my life, the flower of my dreams, and the light of my future.

Visiting the Art Museum

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Wednesday Noon–7pm

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Friday Noon–5pm

Saturday Noon–5pm

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