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Everyday Horrors: Art in the Age of Terror



James Bridle created his “Drone Shadow” to understand drones as a physical reality rather than an idea.
IWM

By HETTIE JUDAH
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LONDON — The artist James Bridle remembers the first time he heard of military drones. Back then, some seven years ago, it took intensive online searching to track down an image of one. As reports of drones as weapons of war and instruments of surveillance became more common, he wanted to understand them better. For him, they were an idea without a physical reality.

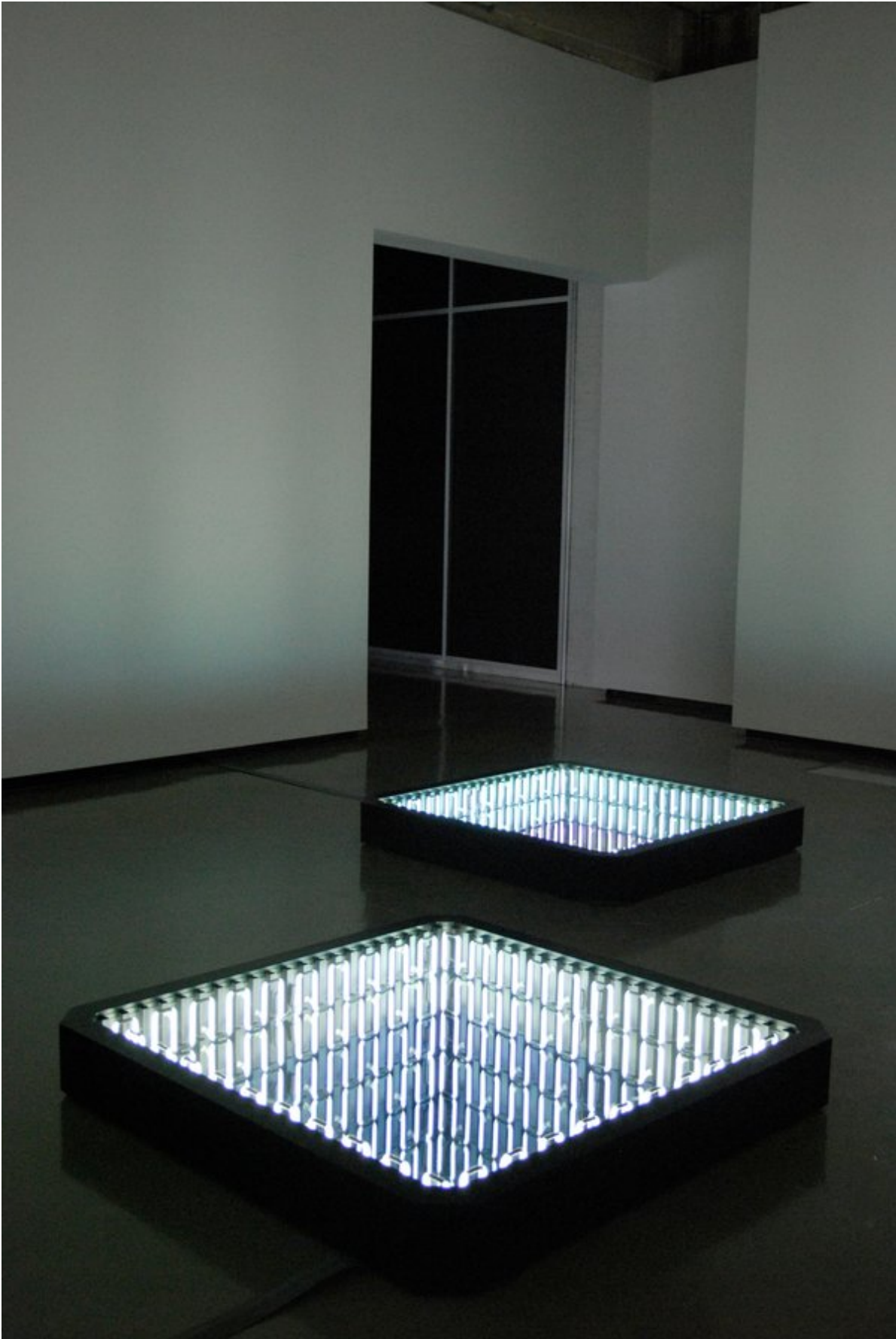
Mr. Bridle found and downloaded the plans for a type of drone used by the United States Air Force and, using string and chalk, drew a full-size outline of the aircraft on the tarmac of the parking lot behind Bridle’s London studio. Seeing the form sketched out as if the drone were casting a full-scale shadow over an urban setting revealed that this previously unseen combat apparatus had a wingspan about the length of a bus.



Rachel Howard's "DHC 6765, Study" from 2005 riffs on a famous image taken at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.
PRUDENCE CUMING ASSOCIATES

As an artist, Mr. Bridle is interested in the relationship between the digital and physical world, in how the former changes the way we think about the latter. "Drones are one of those technologies that seemed to go from science fiction to completely mundane without going through a critical-thinking stage," he said. "It seemed to stand for so much: war, crime, violence and technology." He has since realized versions of the work, called "Drone Shadow," in locations from Washington to Istanbul.

The latest version of "Drone Shadow" falls across the atrium of the Imperial War Museum London as the first work in the exhibition "Age of Terror: Art Since 9/11." Curated by Sanna Moore, the show explores how artists have responded to conflict since those calamitous events. Taking the attack on the World Trade Center as a cultural turning point, the exhibition "reflects on the continuing state of emergency we've been in and how the world has changed: mass surveillance, civil rights, detentions without trial," Ms. Moore said.



Iván Navarro's work "The Twin Towers" was created in 2011, 10 years after the buildings it refers to were destroyed.

THELMA GARCIA / GALERIE DANIEL TEMPLON, PARIS-BRUSSELS

The scale of “Age of Terror” — the largest contemporary art exhibition ever staged by the Imperial War Museum — reflects the increase in the number of artists responding to conflict in recent years, Ms. Moore said.

The show opens with works that respond directly to Sept. 11 before moving on to consider how the attacks have permeated daily life, in the United States and beyond. Some began in the immediate aftermath: Tony Oursler started filming the footage used in his work “9/11” in Lower Manhattan soon after the second plane hit. The piece “9/12 Front Page” by the German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann assembles 151 newspaper covers from around the world from the following day, many carrying the same photograph.



The Scottish artist Nathan Coley, whose 2012 work “A Place Beyond Belief” is featured in the Imperial War Museum’s exhibition, was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2007.
STUDIO NATHAN COLEY

“Age of Terror” examines a pattern of cause and effect, drawing links between the attacks on Sept. 11, associated conflicts in the Middle East and the rise in state control and surveillance that accompanied the amorphous war on terror. In Jitish Kallat’s “Circadian Rhyme 1” (2011), figurines arranged in a row undergo body checks by security officers, a sight now familiar in an increasingly suspicious culture. Ms. Moore’s show also looks at what she called “the spread and institutionalization of violence” through works by Coco Fusco and Martha Rosler.

During the American-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Ms. Rosler reprised and implicitly drew parallels to a collage practice she initiated during the Vietnam War. In “House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, New Series” (2004-8), Ms. Rosler, as she had in those earlier works, pasted images of apparently distant violence into idealized pictures of the home of an American family. In Fusco’s video “Operation Atropos” (2006), the artist subjected a group of her female students to an immersive P.O.W. simulation staged by retired United States Army interrogators. Like Ms. Rosler’s work, “Operation Atropos” compresses the perceived distance between the United States and its theaters of conflict.



Coco Fusco subjected a group of her female students to an immersive P.O.W. simulation in her video “Operation Atropos.”

COCO FUSCO / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS) NEW YORK; COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

The concluding segment of the exhibition examines the destruction, displacement and physical threat in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, and the impact it has had on the idea of home. Most of these artists were informed by “personal experience,” Ms. Moore said. Among them is the Iraqi Kurdish photographer Jamal Penjweny, who after years as an acclaimed war reporter returned to fine art, hoping to create a more nuanced vision of Iraq. In his photo series “Saddam Is Here” (2009-10), ordinary Iraqis — including a dentist, a shepherd, a butcher and a soldier — hold head shots of the dictator’s face in front of their own, suggesting an indelible, internalized legacy.



In Jamal Penjweny's photo series "Saddam Is Here" (2009-10), ordinary Iraqis hold head shots of the dictator's face in front of their own.

JAMAL PENJWENY / RUYA FOUNDATION

In the opening section of the show, Gerhard Richter's "September" places the Sept. 11 attacks in the context of a century of violence. Completed in 2005, "September" is an antiheroic historical painting: a work of modest size that, through scraped-off paint, retains the dissolving forms of the twin towers as the second is engulfed in the fireball of an exploding plane. Mr. Richter was 13 years old when his home city of Dresden was devastated by Allied forces in 1945. "September" follows bodies of work by the artist addressing his own family's military involvement, the postwar rebuilding and rearming of Germany, and the terrorist activities, trial, imprisonment and deaths of the Baader-Meinhof Gang.

Jake and Dinos Chapman's "Nein! Eleven" (2013) — two towers of mutilated toy soldiers, many wearing Nazi armbands — also places the war on terror in a historical context. "Nein! Eleven" is one of a series of "Hellscape" — grotesque sculptural landscapes populated by nightmarish figurines engaged in acts of brutal violence — that the brothers commenced in 1999. "We are interested in the ideological justification for state violence and the mythologized threat of terror, and how the two interlace," Jake Chapman wrote via email. "Our work tickles the dark underbelly of all things nice, so that it coughs up its sinister truth."

For Mr. Bridle, the roles of art and political activism are different. "Thinking through other ways of representing and talking about things is important," he said. "In the case of the drone, someone else needed to represent it other than the military itself." This commitment to creating an alternative, unofficial depiction of conflict places Bridle's work on an unexpected continuum with that of the embedded war artists long associated with the Imperial War Museum.



The video artist Omer Fast's "5000 Feet Is the Best" (2011) is based on interviews with a former drone pilot.

Bridle's projects have had an impact on the way drone strikes have been reported. Between 2012 and 2015, the artist posted satellite images on Instagram every time the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported a drone strike outside official theaters of combat. "Dronestagram" offered a drone's eye view of the landscape that had been bombed. The images were subsequently used in the news media, said the artist: "Reports that would usually have featured a Ministry of Defense image of a drone were instead publishing images of the landscape in which the strike had taken place."

Rather than the work of war artists delivering images from a remote battleground, "Age of Terror" is the product of a war without boundaries — art from an era marked by ubiquitous threat and paranoia. It is an exhibition in which the war is here and now. The institution dedicated to conflict has turned to the art of our everyday.