

*how do you surrender to a drone?*

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## ABSTRACT

The exhibition, *how do you surrender to a drone?*, is a cohesive installation of interrelated artworks. It includes three-dimensional metal objects, experimental photographic-based forms, and large photocopies adhered directly to the gallery walls. The challenge is one of presenting a complex political subject through abstract representation. The use of specific materials and the conjoining of photographic components and sculptural armatures guides the works aim to invoke and question content that is violent and distressing. Understood as a *non-site* in the sense of Smithson's *Sites and Non-sites*, the installation employs abstraction to articulate the complexities of a newly emerging subjecthood present in our modern world. Through the manipulation of materials and the creation of forms, that come into being as key figures operating within the installation, a dialogue of charged energies is created and the installation is able to communicate and extend a discussion that would normally supersede effective description.

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## INTRODUCTION

The exhibition, *how do you surrender to a drone?*, presented in the Gales Gallery of York University (August 7-13, 2015), is a cohesive installation of interrelated works. It includes three-dimensional painted metal objects, experimental photographic-based forms derived from scanned, textile sourced materials and large photocopies that are adhered directly to the gallery walls.

The number of works in the final exhibition include five large wall-mounted photocopy prints which are arranged on the surrounding walls; in the center of the gallery floor, six photo-based sculptural forms, each with their own accompanying armature; intermingled with an assortment of associated black metal sculptural armatures, arranged in a large clustered grouping.

This is an exhibition with foundation, but without orientation. My subject cannot be named directly but every created thing in this exhibition in some way speaks about this subject, so it is possible to know something of it by way of analogy. *Analogy* in this sense is the *likeness* or *resonance* between my subject and what has been created here. These objects and images are not to be understood as distinct individual items, but rather as a collective of expressive signs.

This subject has been chosen and addressed in this exhibition because of the importance of participation. We know the world only by participating in it and we know our subject only by analogy; by the way things speak about our subject. These objects and images don't exist only in themselves. They exist by sharing in the reality of my subject. They are other to themselves; speaking of themselves they also speak of my subject.

The complexity, intangibility, and imprecise nature of my subject means that it can only be spoken of by other forms that resonate its condition; other forms which point away from themselves and towards my true subject. It is through these forms that my subject is made to be present.

This exhibition is intended to act as a culminating intensification of a process; a process of recognition and of study that has isolated these analogous forms found in my contemporary experience. This exhibition is an enticement of my subject. That said these artworks are not created as a form of dualism. We should not seek to do away with the exhibited elements; the brick or the blackened metal armatures, when contemplating our subject. Don't rid the exhibition of those items, as they are not illusions. My subject is at the foundation of the exhibition and therefore is transcendent of these forms.

The considered use of specific materials in the construction of my work has guided the expansion of my practice beyond that of traditional photographic concerns and presentation to include three-dimensional

sculptural pieces. The conjoining of photographic components and sculptural armatures creates a new deconstructed form for the presentation of photographic work. As a starting point, the two-dimensional image is taken as a challenge. The image plane is manipulated to achieve a perceptual shift in the viewer's experience of the photographic print; overthrowing boundaries between photography and sculpture.

The following paper addresses the process of conceptualizing, creating, and contextualizing each element within the installation. The experimental image-object sculptures are discussed in relation to their non-traditional approach to the photographic practice and its presentation, their strategy of both *indexical* and *iconic* reference, and their interaction with the supporting black metal armatures. The artworks use of flag imagery is outlined. These forms come into being as subjects and key figures operating within the installation. The inclusion of these flags, and an understanding of them as *screens*, is posited as a central gesticulation of the work.

The paper goes on to contextualize the other key elements of the installation, including the blackened metal armatures and the photographic brick prints that are positioned on the walls of the gallery. The metal armatures are the single largest sculptural element in the exhibition and their shapes are loosely collected from media imagery of destroyed environments and objects glimpsed in the background of newscasts. Through these materials, forms, and surfaces, the armatures present subjects without commentary. Through our relation to those subjects, the potential for art objects to facilitate analysis and act as proxies to a political discourse in the absence of an explicit narrative is explored. Similarly, the wall mounted photographs, which depict non-standard brick shapes, are not faithful reproductions of observed objects. Like the metal armatures, the brick images communicate an aesthetic connection to referenced circumstances through their material composition, condition, and nonconforming pattern. The poverty of these "poor images" underscores the potential urgency and condition of their context.

In its second part, the paper brings the various elements of the installation together to discuss the works within the broader theme of politics and abstraction. The work tests the capacity to which art and abstraction can invoke and question content that is violent and distressing. To this end, it is posited that the installation can be understood as a *non-site* in the sense of Robert Smithson's theory of *Sites* and *Non-sites* (with the media and its referenced imagery acting as *site*). The installation employs abstraction to articulate the complexities of a newly emerging subjecthood present in our modern world. Through the means of non-representation and proxies, various components speak to the failing and falling of societies. Evidence of civilian construction, wreckage artifacts, carbonized materials, and representations of the communication methods of war play this role; isolating principle qualities of an image and of materials to steer art towards a discussion of complex and charged politics.

Referencing the radical Italian *Arte Povera* movement of the 1960's, the installation is positioned as a reflective political work that does not respond with the immediacy of an activist stance. This understanding serves as a preface to discussing the works linguistics of form and of material. The challenge of presenting a charged and complex political subject through abstract representation is addressed and the balancing of *intention* and *interpretation* required by such an approach is framed as an endeavor concerned with the primacy, stability, and interdependence of a works aesthetic.

In closing, the paper returns to the formal constructions and material qualities of the work and its resolution. The essential conditions of these specific materials have been foregrounded so that they may speak linguistically to their provisional nature as materials. Through the creation of forms and the manipulation of materials that employ a dialogue of charged energies, the installation is able to communicate and extend a discussion of a complex political nature about distressing societal developments that may normally supersedes effective description.

## Part I: Formal & Conceptual Description of the Works

### The Installation

The exhibition, an installation composed of interrelated objects and images, comes together as an enclosed and ordered site, and constitutes the final *form* of the work itself. This forum, akin to Germano Celant's concept for the *im spazio* ('image space'), is an environment conceived and structured by the artist for the spectator.<sup>1</sup> This understanding, of the work as an environment, is purposeful and in direct opposition to the importance assigned to any one autonomous art object. In some respects, this approach is designed to work against and critique the commodification of the art objects within the installation; working to reduce each element's isolation. The two photographic elements (the brick photocopies and the flag-based image-objects), each works separately to undermine photography's *keepsake* quality and present different, more challenging possibilities for the realization of the medium. In addition, the installation environment is intended to emphasize the shared relationships and conditions of the various elements; facilitating the language of the forms to function and draw their momentary significance from this specific context. Both of these aspects will be discussed further, later in this paper.



ill. 1 - Miles Collyer, *how do you surrender to a drone?*, 2015

Installation view. Gales Gallery, York University.  
UV-printed PETG plastic, steel, gesso, digital photocopy on paper

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<sup>1</sup> Jacopo Galimberti, "A Third-Worldist Art? Germano Celant's Invention of Arte Povera," *ART HISTORY* 36, no. 2 (2013).

## Experimental Image-object Sculptures

These works, which traverse several mediums and take the two-dimensional image plane as a challenge, are not photographs but image-objects. Through the use of photographic processes, source materials (in this case rudimentary textiles made of coloured burlap) are subjected to a multi-step process of translation from material, to image, to print, to three-dimensional form, to sculptural installation.<sup>2</sup> In my process the flag-based image-objects are produced as printed images on polyethylene terephthalate (PETG) sheets. The plastic sheets do not stretch or distend when heated. They simply soften and “relax”, leaving the photographic image intact and undistorted. Once heated PETG shares many of the qualities and dynamics of fabric. Workable for only a brief period until it cools, the process of manipulating and controlling the form of the large printed images produces many unexpected results. The plastic sculptures are process-based, material and expressive, and yet ultimately introduce a condition of fixity and control. Each physical interaction between myself, the image-object, and the supporting metal armature is an experiment with a permanent fixed outcome. This struggle achieves a fitting balance between the artist’s desire to direct the materials and it’s own natural tendencies. Through a combination of digital imaging and sculptural production, the source fabrics are mediated and distanced from their original, in a manner similar to casting.



ill. 2 - Miles Collyer, *Untitled (flag 1)* 2014

UV-printed PETG plastic, steel, gesso. 21 x 13 x 37 in.

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<sup>2</sup> Photographic imagery, created as flatbed-scanned digital files, are commercially printed using durable UV-cured inks. A clear thermoplastic, PETG, commonly used for vacuum-formed product packaging, acts as the substrate. Images, in the form of digital files, are printed onto these sheets, a white layer of ink is then put down to achieve opacity, and then a second layer of printed image is applied, resulting in a rigid double-sided print. The printed PETG sheets then go through the “drape-forming” process. As a thermoplastic, the PETG requires only moderate heat (120°C/300°F) before it becomes pliable and remains workable for 30 seconds as it cools.

These works punctuate the installation, which is otherwise devoid of colour, by employing a color palette of primary blue, red and yellow. Although brought into the sculptural realm, they retain a “photographic status” both through their means of production and by maintaining the photographic impulse to fix subjects in time, at the same time introducing an unusual, very haptic interaction between myself and the photographic image. Photography's application in this instance is not one rooted in a camera or lens-based use of the medium. It is reminiscent of, and resonant with printmaking and monoprint techniques; tools used to copy and to mimetically shift between materials, reintroducing form and texture to a layered, two-dimensional image. Each image-object is accordingly the trace (or index) of the source textile, establishing its meaning through a physical/visual relationship to its referent; both revealing and then fixing the potentiality of the fabrics configuration.<sup>3</sup> This analysis is made even more layered though the existence of photo-generated flag iconography in each image-object. The image-objects employ strategies of both *indexical* reference to the source textile though the use of photography, as well as *iconic* reference though the pictorial use of flag symbolism, which establishes meaning from behind the forms of abstract representation (if one possesses knowledge of the semaphoric system).<sup>4</sup>

While the qualities of the thermoplastic substrate when heated briefly mimic those of a fabric in its malleability, all that remains of the source subject is a photographic representation of its textural warp and weft. For a limited moment it is a copy in motion, possessing the superficial qualities and potentiality of the fabric it seeks to imitate. Ultimately cooled and thus fixed in a determined position, the process leading up to the capturing of its decisive form is not all that dissimilar from the photographic process itself with its preparation, chemically active intervals, and the “fix” of the final frozen moment. This transgressive experiment explores the primitive manipulations of a photographic print, sharing similar impulses to that of historic darkroom processes. It makes allusions to camera-less or alterative image construction such as those demonstrated in Moholy-Nagy's photograms or Samaras' Polaroid manipulations. The haptic possibilities of photography through an emphasis on materiality and process are engaged in a contemporary digital context.

The image-based aspects of the installation are at once searching for as well as challenging the traditional boundaries of photographic practice and aesthetics. This is motivated by a sense of tedium and even failure of the traditional functions and methods employed by the medium. Basic working processes of the medium and traditional representational and expressive functions of the photographic print are not present in the work. As previously stated, the two-dimensional photographic image is taken as a challenge and a confrontational approach towards it has been adopted. Images are drastically manipulated both physically and digitally; false and impossible perspectives introduced; both new and highly rudimentary printing techniques employed; the currency and preciousness of the photographic print

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<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3, no. Spring (1977).

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

subverted; three-dimensionality of the final form created; and a new relationship with the photographic support structures investigated.

The flags, and their process, introduce a disorientation to the work that plays with the viewers perception and understanding of the image-objects. Regarding the alternative and experimental methods used to create and present this work, their unconventional processes intentionally raise the question of whether their existence is image-based or object-based, or whether a new understanding of images and their presenting apparatus must be arrived at. The unconventional interaction between the two sculptural elements of the image-objects and the metal armatures forces, or makes explicit, what is in fact the case for all photographs, their physical and indexical need to be supported. The image-objects and wall mounted photocopies are very self-conscious of their own engagement in the language of display. The works actively interrogate traditional manners of presentation and advance the viability of alternative approaches in the future. The methods of presentation adopted by these image-based works are not banal and consequently make the viewer conscious of the act of looking. Due to their inherent reliance on the supportive armatures, the plastic image-objects do not possess an indifference to their supports, and neither should the viewer. Provoked to move around the objects and to situate both themselves and the sculptural works in relation to the wall-sized photographic enlargements, the viewer should question the role played by support in the language of display. The installation makes us consider what it means to look at something that is asking us to look at it, in a context that asserts a complex spatial relationship with materials and their spatial environments.

The series of six formed thermoplastic photographic flag sculptures are arranged and installed within a larger grouping of supporting armatures made of welded and painted steel rod (rebar). As objects, they are extricated from an unknown context, like a photograph cut from a magazine. The forms, and casual positioning of the now motionless flags, suggest an account of manipulation in some prior circumstance. Hung, lifted, draped, slung, rolled, turned, grabbed, dropped, folded, pinched, cascading, enveloping, discarded, strewn.<sup>5</sup> These are the presumed activities and procedures applied to the materials. These sculptural procedures relate to a manner of working put forth by artist Richard Serra, in both methods and expressive dimension. They are “results from the act of doing”; “The making of the form itself, whether lead rolls or poles for the *Prop Pieces*, was implied . . . within the physical transformation of material from one state to another.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> After Richard Serra, “Verb List Compilation, 1967–68,” *Avalanche 2* (Winter 1971), p. 20; and Lawrence Weiner, *Tracce/Traces* (Torino: Sperone editore, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Serra, “About Drawing” (1977) as cited by Liz Kotz, “Language between Performance and Photography,” *OCTOBER*, no. 111 (2005).



ill. 3 - Richard Serra, *To Lift*, 1967

Vulcanized rubber. 36 x 80 x 60 in.  
Courtesy David Zwirner Gallery. Photo: Peter Moore © 2013.  
Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The actions, varied in their degree of affected state (passive, active, aggressive, abandoned), are derived from the interplay between the photographic prints and the supportive sculptural armatures. These acts attest to “the inherent tendencies and properties [of the materials] to recover process and hold onto it as part of the end form of the work”.<sup>7</sup> Some are casually draped, imparting the fabric’s forlorn state, others are seemingly more purposefully arranged suggesting a degree of placement rather than abandonment. In every instance, their condition portrays a flag that has been compromised to a large degree, both in stature and potency in order to perform a communicative act.

## Flag Imagery

A particular type of signal flag was chosen for various reasons: its origins as a utilitarian tool in naval communication (i.e. warfare), the qualities of its graphic design, and its semaphoric language. Flag symbolism is visual communication in its most basic state. A vernacular form rich with potential symbolism, flags are a signaling device that visually denotes values of both the alphabet and specific coded alerts. They operate as identifying markers, but visually register as abstract graphics. They are a form of communication derived to allow communication in conditions unfavourable to speech, radio silence, and language difference; possessing an innate anticipated signification.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Morris (1993) as cited by Nick Kaye, "Material Affects: Gilberto Zorio, Giovanni Anselmo, Giuseppe Penone," in *Site-Specific Art Performance, Place and Documentation* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000).



ill. 4 - Miles Collyer, flag sample

Digital image file. 47 x 27 in.

In this instance, the individual flag graphics have first been produced using commercially produced dyed burlap. This particular material has been chosen for the pronounced nature of its weave, which registers with more textural accentuation in the photographic print, as compared with other fabrics (felt, polyester etc.). Due to the coarse and pronounced quality of the textile material, it shares with the exhibit's other key materials (rebar, coarse cement, etc) a high degree of material discernibility that speaks to their provisional nature as materials of (and about) construction; in a state of uncertainty, not yet attaining, or perhaps spoiled from, a condition of refinement.

These assembled panels of fabric are then scanned and rendered as a large digital image file. Along with providing a manageable format with which to work and further manipulate, the picture image flattens and condenses information into a unified gestalt, delineated within a confined composition. This translation into photography —along with the ultimate frozen permanence of the heated, draped, and cooled thermoformed material— inhibits the potentiality of the fabric; physical shape and image content now both fixed.

A paradox of the flag sculpture comes from its use of visual semaphore that is explicitly positioned within a non-communicative function. There is an absence of a literal *message* to be deciphered by the viewer. Through the inclusion of these flags, the work raises the subject of military communication and its failure, in a diplomatic sense, to avert violence. *Politics* is defined by author and professor of Political Science James Schmidt as a “project of autonomy and the achieving of agreement among a collectivity through communication and recognition.”<sup>8</sup> This is what differentiates it from modern war and acts of covert

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<sup>8</sup> James Schmidt (ed., *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), as cited by Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *PUBLIC CULTURE* 15, no. 1 (2003).

violence. “Politics is the exercise of [just] reason in the public sphere.”<sup>9</sup> Supplanted in our modern condition by speed, stealth, distance, surveillance, and the aerial perspective, communication and a “just” politics is forgone and replaced by claims of *precision* achieved through *information*. In this context, the flags lay limp and discarded, possessing little relevance in an era of black helicopters and weaponized robotics. Embodiments of communication, now failing to act as little more than servants of internal exchange and relics signifying traditional honour.



ill. 5 - Miles Collyer, *how do you surrender to a drone?*, 2015

Installation view  
UV-printed PETG plastic, steel, gesso, digital photocopy on paper

Strewn and discarded within the installation, amongst the cluster of blackened and lacerated metal artefacts of civilian construction, the signaling devices lie in stark aesthetic contrast to the rigid industrial nature of their surroundings. The viewer will question the role of these flags in this context. Are they implicated; laying some claim of pathetic conquest over this environment, or similarly victimized within it. As part of their semaphoric ability, flags are implicitly understood as a fundamental tool in the assertion of sovereignty, and expressions of sovereignty are structurally coupled with acts of violence. As philosopher and political scientist Achille Mbembe posits in his essay *Necropolitics*, “to exercise sovereignty is to

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.”<sup>10</sup> Through its formal properties the installation represents a characteristically modern experience occurring in parts of the world where asymmetrical power and dissimulated weapons and information have the capacity to dictate who may live and who will die. By analogy, the work imparts a feeling of senselessness and disorder.

For all its openness and resistance to providing a definitive determining factor that would pinpoint the specific context of the work within contemporary world events, the installation nonetheless facilitates an interpretive process by directing the viewer’s response through titling, form, and materials, and qualities of surface and image. The charged associations of flags —included in this case as strewn fabrics with a military origin, as opposed to a national one— are set in contrast to the other materials and forms included in the exhibition. The flags come into being as subjects and key figures of the installation. These are virtualized flag-objects that despite their complex three-dimensional form, remain true to Virilio’s concept of what comprises the *screen*. To Virilio, the *screen* is a virtual surface that remains in a metaphoric, indexical register, and this characteristic overrides any specificities of its media formation (be it television, or film etc).<sup>11</sup> Virilio’s screen is “the site of projection of the light of images” as well as the *site*<sup>12</sup> of ‘the passage from something material to something that is not’.<sup>13</sup> The inclusion of these flags, and an understanding of them as screens, is a central gesticulation of the work. It is central to a claim that atrocities, interfaced through virtualizations and proxy technologies of war, separate societies through derealization and abstraction from the events in real space and real time; thereby facilitating such heinous actions.

The failure of modern military technology and methods to put forth a communicative function is being examined by this artwork. Asymmetrical technology and dehumanizing military bureaucratic systems existing within the general contemporary context is a subject upon which this work reflects. The establishment of this asymmetry, and the desire for an artwork to not be communicative through the use of linguistic sign, is aptly expressed by artist Lawrence Weiner when he states, “the only thing that interested me was the attempt to deal with the presentation of information by use of materials —paint, canvas, steel, stone, etc.— which had nothing to do with the presentation of information.”<sup>14</sup> The aim here is to have the work function as a political conscious gesture; acting linguistically through the presentation of specific forms and materials in the given context of the gallery; deliberately and systematically ambiguous, not operating through explicit or didactic means.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Virilio (1998/2000) as cited by A Friedberg, "Virilio's Screen: The Work of Metaphor in the Age of Technological Convergence," *JOURNAL OF VISUAL CULTURE* 3, no. 2 (2004).

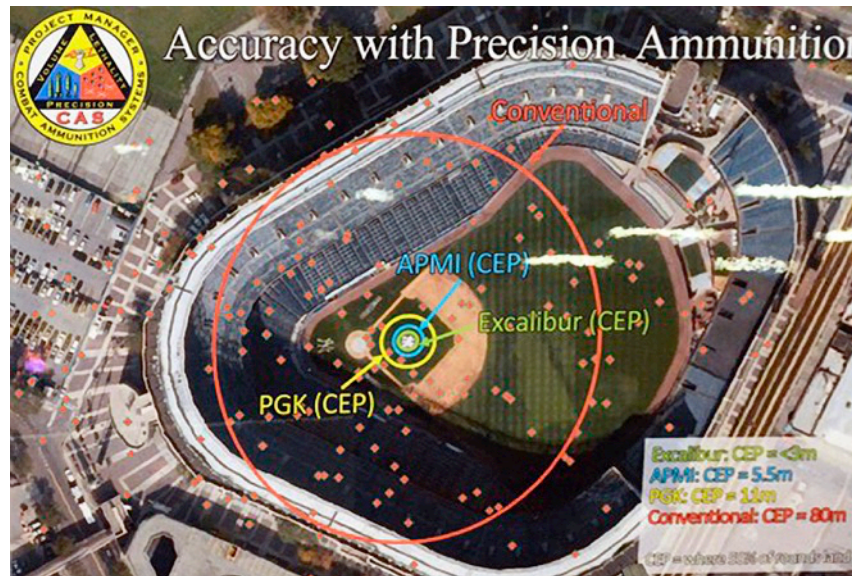
<sup>12</sup> The term *site* is purposefully being used here in relation to Smithson’s *Site/Nonsite*; a concept which is explored further later in the paper.

<sup>13</sup> Virilio (2001) as cited by Friedberg, "Virilio's Screen: The Work of Metaphor in the Age of Technological Convergence."

<sup>14</sup> L. Gumpert et al., "Interview with Lawrence Weiner," in *Early Work: Lynda Benglis, Joan Brown, Luis Jimenez, Gary Stephan, Lawrence Weiner* (New York: New Museum, 1982).

## Metal Armatures (“blackened/carbonized lines”)

The single largest sculptural element in the exhibit is a cluster of blackened metal forms which occupy the central floor space of the gallery. Arranged elliptically, the configuration of the forms within the gallery space reference an area of Circular Error Probability (CEP); a concept found in the military science of ballistics, which uses the radius of a circle as a measure of a weapon system's precision.<sup>15</sup>



ill. 6 - Combat Ammunition Systems, CEP plotted over a sports stadium to show scale

David Vergun. Product Design & Development website,  
<http://www.pddnet.com/news/2015/05/engineering-conventional-munitions-become-smart> (accessed July 1, 2015).

The average scale of each armature form occupies roughly a 24" x 24" footprint. Six of the black metal armature sculptures support the thermoformed textile image-objects, while the majority stand alone and unfettered. Even when they do not directly interact with the image-objects, these metal forms are referred to as *armatures* for their similarity to structural supporting frameworks; absent of their skin, surrounding materials, and even discernable purpose. They range in size and degree of intricacy; some large and voluminous, others intricate and refined. The forms also range in their degree of structural precision, with some appearing very erect and almost architectural, while other are more rounded, loose, gestural, and even abject. Besides their colour and steel construction each metal form shares another characteristic; a degree of fragmentary incompleteness, or of structural laceration. The apparent holes, penetrations, and removed sections are to be understood as *violations* made upon the objects.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Adey, Mark Whitehead, and Alison J. Williams, "Introduction: Air-Target Distance, Reach and the Politics of Verticality," *THEORY CULTURE & SOCIETY* 28, no. 7-8 (2011).

*If nothing can be added, then something must be destroyed.*<sup>16</sup>

– Rosalind Krauss, writing on the intersection of “poor”, “entropy”, and *Povert *.

The fundamental qualities of the minimal armatures were finally arrived at following an extend period of self-criticism, which demanded that a degree of purity be achieved and increasingly less material quality be borrowed from any further external material reference. The simplicity of form and the completely black muted matte surfaces of the supportive armatures establish limits to their visual characteristics; no coded references, nothing conspicuous, no recognizable form or function, or familiar or distracting signifiers of colour, texture, or even material; possibly seen or not seen. This is an important contrast to the saturated flag works; allowing the two elements to collide, but not compete. The refusal of colour achieved in the creation of these metal armatures also shares an affinity to the drawing practice of Eva Hesse; having originated in a sense of lament and solidarity with the denatured and destroyed form.<sup>17</sup> They signify afflicted, ruined, carbonized, violated forms that now stand before you in their ossified state. These are objects that may have witnessed death. The lacerations and violations being the most explicit allusion to some continuing threat to their formal integrity, and the irreversibility of their descent into an entropic condition.<sup>18</sup>



ill. 7 - Miles Collyer, *Untitled (flag 2)*, 2014

UV-printed PETG plastic, steel, gesso. 56 x 34 x 53 in.

<sup>16</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome," *OCTOBER*, no. 124 (2008).

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Hesse's Endgame: Facing the Diagram," in *Eva Hesse Drawing*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Krauss, "Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome."

Collected from media imagery of destroyed environments and objects glimpsed in the background of newscasts, the metal forms present as familiar, yet unidentifiable, external references. Possibly domestic, maybe industrial, most surely civilian. The static aftermath of warfare and aerial bombardment is often illustrated as exposed and contorted metal, crumbled and fractured concrete, and fabric cast and strewn asunder. Media images and all of their associated content have jumped onto the nervous system and



ill. 8 - Media reference image for metal armatures

Olly Lambert. *Syria Behind the Lines*, FRONTLINE website, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/syria-behind-the-lines/> (accessed April 14, 2013).

reverberated with a morose and resolute effect. This “radiation” of media imagery has resulted in alienation towards the societies that are implicated in such violence and of which I am a part. All that has been taken from these repeated media experiences such as subtle material fragments and qualities glimpsed in video frames and journalistic photographs. This body of work involves the creation of objects following an analysis of images.<sup>19</sup> Sculpture made through photography. Through materials, forms, and surfaces, the armatures present subjects without commentary and in our relation to those subjects, the potential for art objects to facilitate analysis and act as proxies to a political discourse in the absence of an explicit narrative.

*Freedom from an alienating rationalistic system, from coherence ... [Celant] speaks of a ‘poor’ art as opposed to a complex one, of an art that does not add ideas or things to the world but that discovers what’s already there.*<sup>20</sup>

- Christov-Bakargiev, referring to early work in the *Arte Povera* movement and what that moment of aesthetic rebellion meant.

<sup>19</sup> Eyal Weizman, *Forensis: Thresholds of Detectability*, Mvs Proseminar Series (Toronto: John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, Feb. 13, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Christov-Bakargiev (1987) as cited by Kaye, "Material Affects: Gilberto Zorio, Giovanni Anselmo, Giuseppe Penone."

There is no immediate connection between the world of these exhibited forms, these signs, and the circumstance of the broadcasted objects which they refer to. The precise media *site* of collection is not established as a solid or stable ground. The media *site* writ large offers the occasional narrow glimpse into the horrid reality, but the nature of these observed forms, and the state of the materials are allowed to act as proxy objects in a study of ballistic targeting and the aftermath of a limitless violence facilitated by the technocratic administration of war.<sup>21</sup> The dissimulated environment, in the sense posited by Virilio, is one where carefully manufactured, released and utilized visual and numerical *information* covers up the *reality* of the condition that our society affects. Body-as-target. Target-as-computer visualization identified through behavioral pattern recognition and surveillance. Passersbys in this real environment-as-“errors”, recognized as percentages. The dissimulated environment of the screen, be it the television monitor or the computer control terminal or the irrelevant military flag, is a concealment and derealization of the reality.

*In the press and in the practical uses of photography, the picture is a conveyer of social material; of meaning and of subjects, of information and opinion. This is a perfectly valid, but totally instrumental use of the picture. What distinguishes a work of art, in any medium, is that it somehow resists any instrumentalization of itself. The desire not to pass through the picture to the subject. Artworks place us before subjects without defining our relation to them by means of a commentary.*<sup>22</sup>

– Jeff Wall

To the degree that they were collected from media imagery, the metal armatures hold some status as *readymades*. The forms have been gathered, processed, and repurposed to function within the context of the art installation. In this way they share some connections and parallels to the photographic elements with the exhibition. The wall-mounted brick images will be discussed further in the following section, but for now they share with the armatures in this discussion of the readymade because the process of photography physically transposes the source textile and brick objects from their existence in reality into the fixed condition of the artwork. Through this passage into isolation, or selection and inclusion alongside other elements, “empty” forms are endowed with signification.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Philosopher Hanna Arendt understood “unlimited violence” to mean the displacement of the traditional limits that politics places on violence through the use of technology, such as drone soldiers, or by other means. Arendt understood that such developments may change the fundamental dynamic of war and politics. Even tyrannical governments are predicated on power that comes from the support of key segments of the population. Violence is held in check by political limits. The more violence a government needs to rely upon, the less power it has at its disposal. (See Roger Berkowitz, “The Impact of Modern Warfare on Power and Politics,” Hannah Arendt Center, <http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=10201>.) Modern day Syria and the Assad regime’s loss of legitimacy is a good example of this political limit being surpassed. Arendt’s warning is that the coming age of “robot soldiers” might bring about the end of the political advantage power has over violence. With the push of a button a totalitarian ruler can exert nearly unlimited violence and destruction in the absence of consent or political support. The support needed to build, program, maintain and fly drones is a fundamentally different job than being in close proximity to the direct execution of military violence, stripping war of its human and active character. Therefore it is a distancing factor that contributes to a discussion of the dissimulating, or covering up, of war’s visceral reality. As Roger Berkowitz, Director of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and the Humanities at Bard College, writes; “One reason for the continuation of war, however, is that the horrors of war are made ever more palatable and silent—at least to the victors—by the use of technology that exerts violence without the need for political power and participation.” (ibid.)

<sup>22</sup> Ann Pollock, *The Crooked Path, Part 2*, podcast audio, Ideas from CBC Radio, 54:452014.

<sup>23</sup> Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America.”



ill. 9 - Media reference image for metal armatures and brick forms

Asmaa Waguih / REUTERS. (detail) The Telegraph website,  
[http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/02369/potd-syria-catapul\\_2369820b.jpg](http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/02369/potd-syria-catapul_2369820b.jpg)  
(accessed Oct 27, 2012).



ill. 10 - Media reference image for brick forms

Oly Lambert. *Syria Behind the Lines*, FRONTLINE website,  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/syria-behind-the-lines/> (accessed April 14, 2013).



ill. 11 - Media reference image for textile image-object forms

Ahmed Jadallah / REUTERS. (detail) The Guardian website,  
<http://www.theguardian.com/news/gallery/2012/dec/27/24-hours-in-pictures#img-1>  
(accessed Dec 29, 2012).

## Brick Images

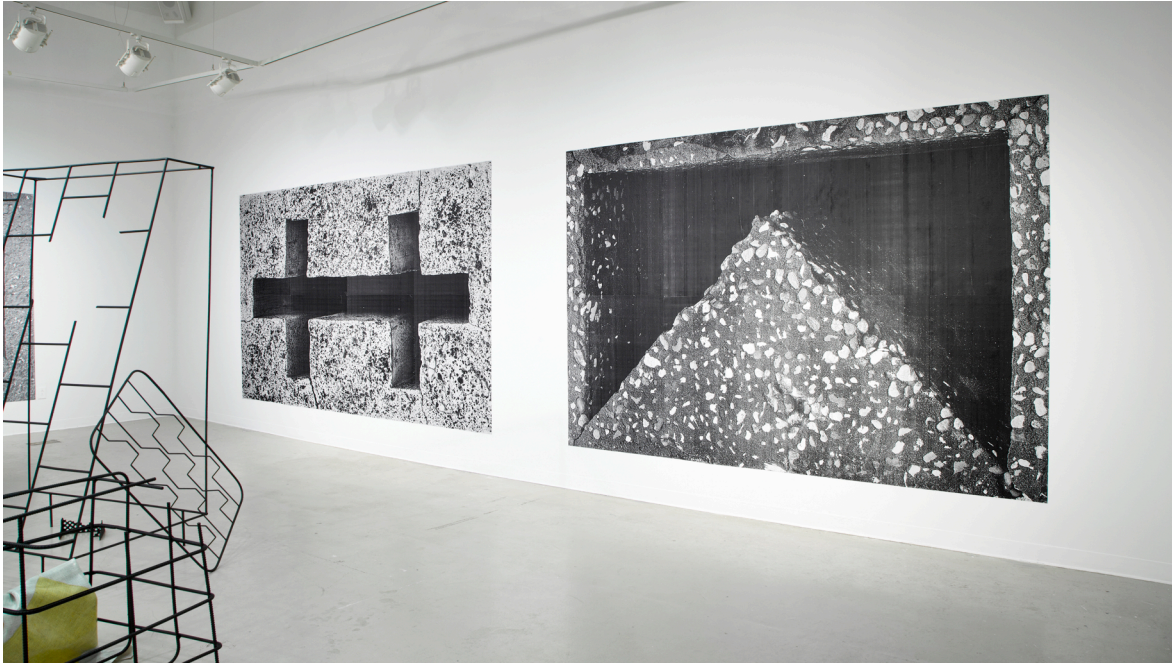
*Postproduction is not working on content in retrospect but creating content. Editing is where the meaning is created.*<sup>24</sup>

– Hito Steyerl

The third principle element of the installation is a series of five large photocopy prints that are mounted in an irregular dispersion on three of the surrounding walls; each roughly 110" x 150". These murals, made from a tiled array of smaller composite prints, are dominant in their scale; appearing to be more *of the wall* itself, rather than something hung from or affixed to it. These photocopied images on simple bond paper, dispense with commodification by possessing little currency or fidelity as photographic prints. Their reduction of tone, loss of detail, and visual rugged grittiness complements the subject matter (cast concrete), and clearly distinguishes them from the other photographic elements, the flags. With their provisional and construction-based nature, the matte carbon-black tone links them to their associated painted metal armatures.

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<sup>24</sup> "Techniques of the Observer: Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras in Conversation," *Artforum* 2015. original emphasis.



ill. 12 - Miles Collyer, *Untitled* (brick 4 and 5), 2015

Digital photocopy on paper. Dimensions variable (150 x 90 in. pictured)

The photographs depict non-standard bricks that are purposefully unfamiliar in their structure and outside any standardized system of known brick forms. The referenced design of the bricks—the negative and positive space that creates the geometric pattern comprising their structure—is derived from the same system of visual semaphore employed in the flag works. Averse to both a conventional and arbitrary approach for the design of bricks, the installation also demanded that its scope of reference be narrowed and that additional external elements not be introduced. In the studio, the bricks are produced as oversized, one-off cast cement blocks, which are then photo-documented in preparation for their final realization as printed images.

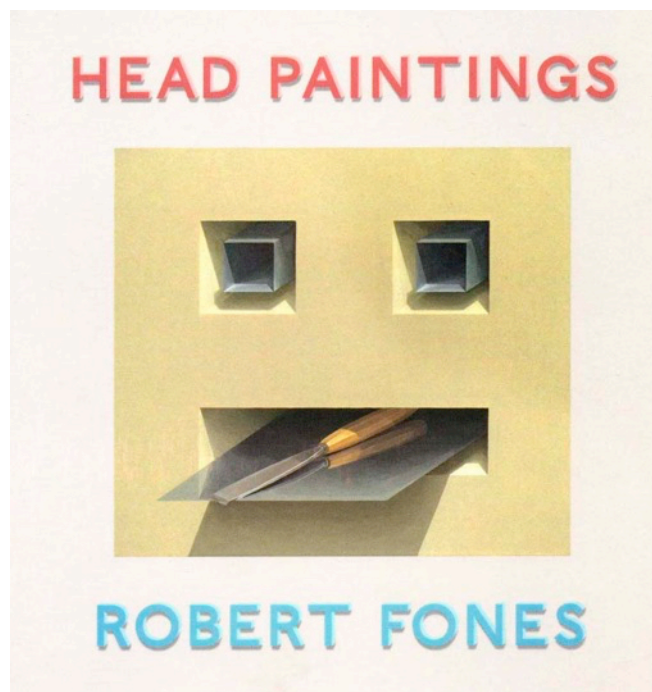
Like the metal forms, these bricks are not faithful reproductions of observed objects and they only partially reflect the essential nature of the brick form. Rather, they are inspired by collected media imagery and readymade objects glimpsed in the ruined backgrounds of war reportage. Familiar, yet unidentifiable, external references. The forms communicate an aesthetic connection to these references through their material composition and nonconforming pattern. Thus *form* in this context is not simply a term for the visual character of the brick images (or the black metal armatures); it is also a connection to an aesthetic condition of other forms in a referenced circumstance.<sup>25</sup> Through their formal properties the bricks represent a characteristically contemporary experience, imparting a feeling of senselessness and

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<sup>25</sup> Alex Klein and Los Angeles County Museum of Art., *Words without Pictures*(Los Angeles: Wallis Annenberg Photography Department, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2009).

disorder; directing the viewer's response through the qualities of surface and image. In this manner *form* is being spoken as a language, and in the context of this installation the *language of things* is being amplified.<sup>26</sup> The linguistics of form and of material will be discussed further, later in this paper.

Additionally, the bricks are not faithful reproductions of the objects created in the studio. Formally inspired in part by the *Head Paintings* of Robert Fones, they employ a false and impossible perspectival shift.<sup>27</sup> This adulterating shift, performed in digital postproduction, introduces a consideration of the sculptural object's spatial condition to the photographic façade. The intervention also foregrounds the *real unreality* of the photograph; adding an explicit and further transformation to the image, beyond the implied displacement already achieved through its passage into photography.<sup>28</sup>



ill. 13 - Robert Fones. *The Head Paintings* book cover

Toronto: Coach House Books, 1997.

Regarding their photographic presentation, the brick images are intended to be cheap, immediate, provisional, and possessing a visual quality that shares a level of crudeness which contributes to our understanding of the subject. Their vague appearance emphasizes their status as representations of representations, similar to their inspired source originals, but several times removed. Only partially

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<sup>26</sup> Hito Steyerl, "The Language of Things," *European institute for progressive cultural policies* (2006).

<sup>27</sup> Robert Fones, *The Head Paintings*, 1 vols.(Toronto: Coach House Books, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes (1967) as cited in Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America Part 2 " *October* 4, no. Autumn (1977).

reflecting the essential nature of the things that they represent. Seth Siegelau's description of photographs, and the non-essentialness of their material realization, is relevant to include here: "Because all this [the photograph] is a record of the work of art, which is right behind it, in a way."<sup>29</sup> The structure behind these structures is permanently absent. These brick images, especially given their photocopied nature, are evidently not *the* work of art because, in part, their destruction is inherent and preordained by their means of presentation and installation. Once ripped and shredded from the wall, few consider that the artwork has been destroyed.

This is an exhibition where only bad copies proliferate. Filmmaker and theorist Hito Steyerl calls these bad copies "poor images" which, in their poverty, actively work in opposition to the fetishization of high-resolution images. The poor image champions two different values, one of *speed* (becoming "a copy in motion"), and the other of *truth* (speaking to marginalization and the source brick image's connection to an abundance of low resolution images of displaced and ruined environments). Taken from a context of news imagery, the Internet, or streaming broadcasts, the poor image, in Steyerl's sense, is imbued with identifying lo-fi marks and grainy remnants of its journey.<sup>30</sup> As "a copy in motion", an image of the object in use is rasterized, blurred and abstracted, acknowledging its otherness; original to some creation and function elsewhere. As well, the poverty of the "poor image" underscores the potential urgency and condition of its context.

The Italian *Arte Povera* movement understood the concept of "poor" in several complex ways: both as a form of *purity* as well as a means of attaining directness and a reductive *backwardness*.<sup>31</sup> In a critical sense, *poor* is a conscious effort to shed superfluous aesthetics in order to emphasize essential qualities or simply get down to the task of expression unceremoniously.

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<sup>29</sup> "Seth Siegelau, April 17, 1969," in Alberro and Norvell, eds., *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Siegelau, Smithson, and Weiner* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001] p. 34) as cited in Kotz, "Language between Performance and Photography."

<sup>30</sup> Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux*, no. 10 (2009).

<sup>31</sup> Krauss, "Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome."

## Part II: Politics & Abstraction

The title of the exhibition asks a question, *how do you surrender to a drone?* It anticipates future conversations about the impact of technology on society. Technologies, which in a post-9/11 world, separate us directly from the events of real space, real time and real individuals and has us resorting to the “indirect horizon of our dissimulated environment.”<sup>32</sup> The dissimulated environment, where carefully manufactured, released and utilized visual and numerical *information* covers up the *reality* of the condition that our society affects. These are technologies made of the lens and the screen which dehumanize, rationalize and make technical and technocratic, the witnessing of, and complicity in, atrocities executed through bureaucratic processes; enacting “the kill that produces no blood.”<sup>33</sup> The concealment and derealization of the horrid reality.

Western rationality has delivered to the world a synthesis of atrocity and bureaucracy.<sup>34</sup> Administrative rationality (the factory, the bureaucracy, the prison, the army, the military–industrial complex) have transformed violence into a technical, impersonal, silent, precise, and dissimulated act. Drone weapon systems are the latest to come out of a long process of dehumanizing and industrializing death. Each historic step on this path has involved certain key technologies and innovations in the act of state murder, which have aimed at “civilizing” the manner of killing.<sup>35</sup> Cultural sensibilities in which killing the nation’s enemy is viewed as an extension of play have also emerged. Now state violence is a secret form of atrocity and there is a societal sense of indifference; unseen, unknown, remotely conducted, performed on colonized and criminalized societies, interfaced through the screen. In this context, the *site* is the foreign place where absolute violent power is exercised outside of the law and rational objectives have been attributed to the act of killing; a place “where ‘peace’ is more likely to take on the face of a ‘war without end’.”<sup>36</sup>

The derealization of military engagement and the anonymity of armed photography will cause what Virilio would call an *integral accident* to increasingly occur.<sup>37</sup> The *integral accident* is a concept which asserts that developments inherently contain within them the inability to exist without the potential for a secondary consequential negativity; most famously illustrated by Virilio’s inference that the invention of the *ship* was also the invention of the *shipwreck*.<sup>38</sup> The question put forward by the title of this exhibition reflects a

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident*, Accident Originel. (Cambridge : Polity, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Butler, Judith (1992: 11) as cited in Adey, Whitehead, and Williams, "Introduction: Air-Target Distance, Reach and the Politics of Verticality."

<sup>34</sup> Arendt, "Origins of Totalitarianism" as cited by Mbembe, "Necropolitics."

<sup>35</sup> Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (1981) as cited by *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema : The Logistics of Perception* (London ; New York: Verso, 1989); Roger Berkowitz, "Phenomenology of Drones," 2014, no. May 5 (2013).

<sup>38</sup> *Politics of the Very Worst*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1999, p. 89

supposition that the traditional limits placed on violence, by politics, will be displaced by developments such as drones, which make possible unprecedented levels of limitless violence.<sup>39</sup>

In order to address this and greater questions, this body of work tests the capacity to which art and abstraction can invoke and question content that is violent and distressing. Two of the key tenets of *abstraction* in this context are the concepts of *fragmentation* and *ambiguous function*; both in relation to the sculptural forms and their *site* of collection. This installation can be understood as a *non-site* in the sense of Robert Smithson's theory of *Sites and Non-sites*.<sup>40</sup> Non-Site asserts that the *site*, against which it claims definition, is positioned elsewhere and is the specific 'points of collection'. Smithson proposed through his work (mapping) that rather than describing the site, a recollection of a particular kind of encounter—a certain perceptual exposure—would be encapsulated upon the return from the site: "The artist who is physically engulfed tries to give evidence of this experience through a limited revision of the original unbounded state."<sup>41</sup> Such an approach to the site (in this context, the media and its referenced imagery) comes out of a comprehension of the limits of the indexical non-site; foregrounding the abstract nature of its removal and subsequent repurposing.<sup>42</sup> A small part of what was limitlessly *scattered* within the site is now collected, processed, and repurposed as *fragments* at the non-site. This deterritorialization of the forms, from their site of witness and of collection in the media, is a contributor to their abstraction in the context of the gallery.

Abstraction holds a promise to articulate the complexities of a newly emerging subjecthood through the means of non-representation.<sup>43</sup> Vague evidence of civilian construction, wreckage artifacts, carbonized materials, and representations of the communication methods of war (i.e. flags) are all proxies for "falling societies" heading towards this integral accident.<sup>44</sup> The exhibition installation is a depiction of ossified forms, which only moments prior, experienced the piercing of their condition by a missile, or some related violation. In this context, each forms prior function or role is highly ambiguous, thereby abstracting each object and the clustering of their collective array. Speaking of the black metal armatures, each of their defined structural integrities remain to such a degree and with such constructed purposefulness that some prior function is presumed, but remains in question. They are traces of their former existence.

This is a state of aftermath devoid of the representation of war technology, because in their very anonymity and through their command—executed through bureaucratic processes; the dissimulating

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<sup>39</sup> Berkowitz, "The Impact of Modern Warfare on Power and Politics".

<sup>40</sup> Fosco Lucarelli to Socks, June 14, 2014, <http://socks-studio.com/2014/06/14/theory-of-non-sites-by-robert-smithson-1968/>; Robert Smithson, "Unpublished Writings: A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>41</sup> Smithson (1996) as cited in Nick Kaye, "Mapping Site: Robert Smithson," in *Site-Specific Art Performance, Place and Documentation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Smithson and Toner (1996) as cited by *ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> Buchloh, "Hesse's Endgame: Facing the Diagram."

<sup>44</sup> Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," *e-flux*, no. 24 (2011).

screen; and aerial perspective— these technologies will alter societies relationship to the dynamics of war and politics. The work is an attempt to address the ramifications for the collective experience of this acceleration. It challenges the metaphoric and reflective capacity of matter and form—as it is mediated by media imagery, the complex transformations in the mind of the media viewer, and by the production of the artist—to communicate and extend a discussion of a political nature by pursuing, observing, cultivating, understanding, and coming to terms with distressing societal developments through the creation of forms and the manipulation of materials. Not actually touching primary matter, but studying it through the media and through its abstract recreation as art; “The creation of objects following an analysis of images,” as posited by intellectual and architect Eyal Weizman.<sup>45</sup> An attempt at a lived experience through materials, and even art-making as a means of contra-war; a reflective, contemplative, and therapeutic function that demands hard thought.<sup>46</sup> Aiming for a discussion rather than a revelation. Working from within a culture filled with pervasive visual depictions of trauma, it is a way for the self to transcribe the accumulated tensions relating to conflict; different but not unlike *Arte Povera*’s chosen form of resistance. Art possesses the capacity to make us see, but because it operates without the urgency of threat, and in this instance without explicit or didactic linguistics (and therefore with a deliberate ambiguity), the indeterminacy of art is a critical challenge.

Joseph Kosuth understood the complications of this exact challenge. In 1969 he described his move away from working with forms and materials because of the inherent difficulty of controlling the reception of their meanings:

*The separation between one’s own ideas and one’s use of materials . . . becomes almost uncommunicatively wide when confronted by a viewer. I wanted to eliminate that gap.” . . . there is always something hopelessly real about materials.*<sup>47</sup>

This aspect, as posited by Kosuth, summarizes the challenge of trusting forms and materials to function semantically as bearers of abstract or political ideas. More broadly, it was distinctly evident in the object-based contention that existed between (and within the practices of) American Minimalism and Italian *Arte Povera*.<sup>48</sup> On the one hand, radical abstraction; on the other, the near-figurative and self-fabricated work of *Arte Povera*, with its decisive belief in the political agency of artists and the “tendencies and properties” of materials.<sup>49</sup> When adopting the oppositional notions contained within *Arte Povera* —rejecting the attitudes, means and methods of *rich art*— art historian, critic and curator Germano Celant and historians

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<sup>45</sup> Weizman, *Forensis: Thresholds of Detectability*.

<sup>46</sup> “Writers cannot write as rapidly as governments can make war, because writing demands hard thought.” (Bertolt Brecht in 1938 while in the process of writing *Mother Courage*) as cited in B. Brecht and J. Willett, *Brecht Collected Plays: 5: Life of Galileo; Mother Courage and Her Children* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Kosuth by Arthur R. Rose in *Arts Magazine* (February 1969), as cited by Kotz, “Language between Performance and Photography.”

<sup>48</sup> Alex Potts, “Disencumbered Objects (Arte Povera),” *ibid.*, no. 124 (2008).

<sup>49</sup> Kaye, “Mapping Site: Robert Smithson.”

such as Francesco Arcangeli stimulated debate regarding the efficacy of direct versus indirect approaches to a politically minded art practice.<sup>50</sup> Militant tones, inherent in the radical leftist leanings of *Arte Povera*, were countered by views that stressed the need for art to remain indirect and metaphorical. Even when Celant would pull *Arte Povera* back slightly from the militant frontlines, he still preserved the immediate adjacency he saw for artists within a revolutionary process; arguing that art should neither substitute for nor be substituted by "political organization, guerilla warfare, barricades."<sup>51</sup>

Here the installation is a reflective political work, which does not respond with the immediacy of an activist stance, such as *Arte Povera's* far more violent and urgent sense of protest.<sup>52</sup> It is a politics of a deeper sense than that of involvement in a radical movement or through a militant proclamation. It is one that seeks to employ the special political function of art; using the linguistics of material, form, and the identifying qualities of an image to steer art towards a discussion of complex and charged politics. It shares the mentality of artist Pino Pascali, also deeply connected to *Arte Povera*. Pascali emphasized the need for artists to stay somewhat isolated; positing it as a more credible position within which the creative act can function politically as opposed to a more direct political utility for cultural outputs.<sup>53</sup> This echoes as well writer Umberto Eco's position concerning the artist's duty to attack social systems indirectly through the aesthetic medium, rather than by direct political action.<sup>54</sup> In this sense, I am very sympathetic to Pascali and Eco's stance, feeling that politics of a deeper sense should not expose itself to the political and aesthetic mistakes of a strident and relentless activism.

## Linguistics of Form and of Material

*You can't understand the human desire for atrocity without viewing it through a metaphoric or metaphysical lens. You can't understand without using dramatic or religious language because you cannot form the question or the answer with enough profundity without that kind of representation.*<sup>55</sup>

- Jordan Peterson

When psychologist and University of Toronto professor Jordan Peterson uses the term *dramatic or religious language*, I believe that he intends to include communication in a broader sense and I would extend that to the linguistic underpinnings of visual art. But this, the human desire for atrocity, is a difficult form to represent with any precision. Even more difficult to represent is the abstract metaphoric representation of violence wielded by bureaucracy and administration through a virtual and asymmetrical

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<sup>50</sup> Galimberti, "A Third-Worldist Art? Germano Celant's Invention of Arte Povera."

<sup>51</sup> Daniela Palazzoli, 'Con temp l'azione', in Germano Celant, *Art Povera*, 1985, 41, as cited by *ibid*.

<sup>52</sup> Krauss, "Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome."

<sup>53</sup> Galimberti, "A Third-Worldist Art? Germano Celant's Invention of Arte Povera."

<sup>54</sup> David Robey, "Introduction," in *The Open Work* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>55</sup> Jordan Peterson, *A History of Violence*, podcast audio, Ideas from CBC Radio, 53:582015, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/a-history-of-violence-1.2994267>.

military interaction between flying robotic bomb and human victim; and by extension, pushing against the conventional containment of sculptural work to imbue unstable objects within the installation with the load of potential or actual events.

Success, or more accurately, the *aim* of my work would be measured through a balancing of *intention* and *interpretation*. In the defense of any attempt that this work makes to abstractly represent its chosen subject, a reference to Susan Sontag provides a clear distinction between the composite elements of an artwork and the measure of its aim. "Something we have learned to call 'form' is separated off from something we have learned to call 'content,' and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory."<sup>56</sup>

My art doesn't become abstract in an attempt to avoid interpretation, as Sontag would suggest that it should.<sup>57</sup> Rather, it conducts deconstructive experiments with form, and materials, and qualities of surface and image to achieve an expression and reflect upon complex political content. The installation achieves expression through a series of what author David Joselit would call *network aesthetics*.<sup>58</sup> Joselit's notion of *network aesthetics* is relevant in several ways. First it indicates a shift away from an object-based aesthetic, which is characterized by autonomous singular works that possess discernible limits and independent stability.<sup>59</sup> Joselit suggests that such singular objects lend themselves to singular meanings; "well-defined forms" are destined to *contain* significance as if they were vessels.<sup>60</sup> The logical consequence of such autonomy is that stable expression is not achieved through the connected space of relation. Connected and complex expression is the realm of a *networked aesthetics*, which is also premised on the "emergence of form from populations of images."<sup>61</sup> While object-based aesthetics establish meaning through a preoccupation with an inward focus upon the work, "bolstering its primacy and stability," networked aesthetics are necessarily provisional, open, and rely on interdependent connections, traces, and extracts shared between external references and the qualities of form, material, surface and image loosely held by the work.<sup>62</sup> It is through the gathering, processing, and repurposing of many discontinuous units that the installation can produce a system of signs, and through those signs, meaning.<sup>63</sup> In order for a language to exist within abstraction, the forum must be segmented into mutually exclusive units. It is this exchange between the sculptural units, the material forces, and the accounts of process that work to overthrow the containment held by the singular object form.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*(New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1966).

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> David. Joselit, "Populations," in *After Art* (Princeton University Press, 2012). p. 43

<sup>59</sup> Within this shift there also exists an interesting and parallel relation to the discursion between the "poverty" and "purity" of *arte povera*, and the accouterments of "rich art", as put forward in Krauss, "Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome."

<sup>60</sup> Joselit, "Populations."

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America Part 2".

<sup>64</sup> Kaye, "Material Affects: Gilberto Zorio, Giovanni Anselmo, Giuseppe Penone."

In some sense Sontag's work *Against Interpretation* is truly directed more to viewers, rather than to the artist, in an attempt to bound their expectations of art and dictate their responsible position in relation to it. "Real art", as she states, "has the capacity to make us nervous" and its content should not be conformed or made manageable through reductive interpretation.<sup>65</sup> For the artist, the challenge remains in a skilful positioning between reductive interpretation, hollow formalism, or an easily repudiated activist depiction.

The installation is created with a desire to create ambiguity about what is being made, and what the viewer is looking at. The viewer should question what they are seeing as few explicit certainties are provided. A degree of abstract formulation allows for a latitude of potential realizations. For the writer Umberto Eco, *ambiguity* is the product of the "contravention of established conventions of expression;" and the less conventional forms of expression are made to be, the more scope of interpretation they allow for.<sup>66</sup> The complex political content being worked with is speculative, therefore the provision of a more general template of familiar, yet unidentifiable, external references, taking the form of sculptural objects and images, generates multiple possibilities, seems appropriate. Abstraction is used to mediate personal and political viewpoints engaging the viewer.

*In abstraction, meanings can be made, and found, and read, but they are always troubled and in a state of crisis.*<sup>67</sup>

– Mark Godfrey, speaking to his book *Abstraction and the Holocaust*

Returning to *intention*, and Kosuth's stated "gap between materials and ideas:" if the forms, materials, and qualities of surface and of image rise to function *linguistically* in line with my intention, then my aim will have been achieved. The installation's fusion of multiple elements and materials serves as a matrix for a related set of meanings that connect to one another through their use of indexical reference.<sup>68</sup> Ideally, the distinct elements of the installation and their composite material qualities, once synthesized, will invoke their divergent linguistic capabilities to flush out insight, and not be overly veiled by abstraction. It is through innate linguistics that a potential to reach beyond the present exists.

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<sup>65</sup> Sontag, "Against Interpretation."

<sup>66</sup> Robey, "Introduction."

<sup>67</sup> The Audiovisual Archives of the National Institute of Art History (France), "Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*,"(2009).

<sup>68</sup> Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America."



ill. 14 - Miles Collyer, *how do you surrender to a drone?*  
(detail), 2015

Steel, gesso, digital photocopy on paper

*Like that of language to the world: [the non-site] is a signifier and the site is that which is signified. It is not the referent but the language system which is in the foreground.*<sup>69</sup>

– Lawrence Alloway

These linguistics of form and of material must not be silenced through an over distortion or masking of their qualities. This is precisely why a pronounced quality and high degree of material discernibility has been retained in most elements of the work (the rebar, the coarse cement, the textile material reveal themselves as such). The essential conditions of these specific materials have purposefully been left bare and these foregrounded qualities speak to their provisional nature as materials and amplify the “language of things.”<sup>70</sup> In her text, *The Language of Things*, Hito Steyerl recapitulates a very specific line of questioning put forth by Walter Benjamin regarding how humans do in fact relate to the greater world, and more precisely the energies of the material world. She deduces Benjamin’s argument as being that politics are not determined by *content* but by *form*, and that politics are in fact played out in the forms of translation between the language of things and the language of men (languages of “practice” such as law, technology, art, music and sculpture).<sup>71</sup> Steyerl does not hesitate to acknowledge how bizarre such lines of questioning appear to be. But to take them with sincerity reveals an importance in their realization that poignant and unexpected articulations and connections can be achieved through translating the language of things.

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<sup>69</sup> Lawrence Alloway (1981) as cited by Kaye, "Mapping Site: Robert Smithson."

<sup>70</sup> Steyerl, "The Language of Things."

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

A discussion of the *language of things* is essentially an examination that attempts to engage the energies of the material world. At this point of engagement we find the crossroads of the “poor” entity and abstraction. The material “thing language” is derived from a charged energy that typically supersede effective description. Experienced directly, it is not mediated through representation or codified languages, and it is “poor” in the way that it is reductively non-technological.<sup>72</sup> Directness, primality, and purity are all distinguishing qualities pointing to the *truth* which the “poor” entity provides, and that which only the *language of things* knows.

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<sup>72</sup> Krauss, "Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome."

## CONCLUSION

The exhibition, *how do you surrender to a drone?*, has been presented as a cohesive installation of interrelated works. The considered use of specific materials and the conjoining of photographic components and sculptural armatures has guided the works aim to invoke and question content that is violent and distressing. Non-traditional photographic approaches have been used to create forms that come into being as subjects and key figures operating within the installation.

Both the large sculptural element and the dominant wall mounted photographs in the exhibition borrow their qualities from shapes and textures that are loosely collected from media imagery. Through these materials, forms, and surfaces, the armatures and brick images present subjects without commentary. Through the viewer's relation to those subjects, the potential for the installation to facilitate analysis and act as a proxy to a political discourse is explored. The poverty of these "poor images" and violated forms underscores the potential urgency and condition of their context.

The installation is to be understood as a *non-site* in the sense of Robert Smithson's theory of *Sites* and *Non-sites* (with the media and its referenced imagery acting as *site*). The works employ abstraction to articulate the complexities of a newly emerging subjecthood present in our modern world. Through the means of non-representation various components speak to the failing of societies and of systems. Evidence of civilian construction, wreckage artifacts, carbonized materials, and representations of the communication methods of war play this role; isolating principle qualities to steer art towards a discussion of complex and charged politics. The challenge of presenting complex political subject through abstract representation remains, but through the creation of forms and the manipulation of materials that employ a dialogue of related charged energies, the installation is able to communicate and extend a discussion of a nature that would normally supersede effective description.

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