

Digital Media and Performance Activism: Technology, Biopolitics, and New Tools of Transnational Resistance

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The symbolic and expressive qualities of stillness clarify the phenomenological nature of this (resistant) act of arrest. It is not synonym with freezing. Rather, what stillness does is to initiate the subject in a different relationship with temporality. André Lepecki (2001)

The image of the little brown-eyed girl in the photograph on my screen arrests me. My eyes lock on hers and even though more exists in the photograph, I cannot look away from her. She looks six, maybe seven years old. Her short, dark hair frames her face, forming a half-circle across her forehead and down around her ears. She wears a dress that bares her forearms and her neck. Her hands clutch a small object, as if she is holding a favorite toy close to her chest. The corners of her lips are in motion, but it's not clear whether they will move up or down. The absence of a smile marks this photograph of her. The affect transmitting through her face transcends the stillness of the photograph that captures her gaze. Her eyes demand a response. She has a story to tell, and, looking at her, I don't wonder who she is; I already know her story is a tragedy. She keeps me there, staring into my screen, for several minutes. I don't know what to do, I can't hold her, I can't hug her, I can't make her smile. The silence and stillness occupying the minutes of my interaction with the little girl's image

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moves me. I sink into the grief she emits through her stillness, grief that shouldn't be on any child's face.

A group of artists from Pakistan and the U.S. inspired by acclaimed French artist JR, printed the photograph of the little brown-eyed girl on a 90ft by 60ft piece of vinyl for a giant art installation called *#NotABugSplat* in early 2014. They then laid down this gigantic poster in a field in the Khyber Puhtoonkhwa region outside Peshawar, a city in northwestern Pakistan. In an aerial photograph on the installation's website, one can see the roofs of mud houses to the left of her image, and a narrow road above it clearly. If you look closely at the black and white pixels on the greyish-brown road, you will also see the almost invisible tiny figures of people walking and biking. The giant poster of the little girl literally puts a face on the invisible civilians living in this tribal region of Pakistan, which the U.S. has attacked many times since 2004 using Predator drones, remotely piloted aircraft. Black and white dots in the background of the little girl's photograph contrast with her high-resolution self, reminding us that each pixel appearing on the drone operators' screens could be a person.



The villagers in Pakistan help set up the installation *NotABugSplat*.
Images courtesy of *#NotABugSplat* team.

The artists' collective who created *#NotABugSplat* briefly summarize the story of the little girl on the installation's website, notabugsplat.com. According to the Islamabad-based Foundation for Fundamental Rights, her father, mother, and

two young siblings were killed in a drone attack in the North Waziristan village of Dande Darpa Khel. The collective learned this information from lawyer Shehzad Akbar half a year before launching the installation. UK-based legal charity Reprieve works with Akbar to shed light on the consequences of drone strikes in Pakistan. When *#NotaBugSplat*'s creators got in touch with them they shared the photograph of the little girl, taken by photojournalist Noor Behram. Akbar said the child was one of many Afghans who took refuge in the mud homes in the region and that the victims of the attack that killed her family were mostly women and children (Saifi 2014). *#NotaBugSplat*'s site states, as of early 2014, over 3,500 people died in this region — more than 200 of them children — as a result of more than 380 strikes.

U.S. military personnel operating the drones refer to collateral damage, such as these children and accidental killings, as “bug splats, since viewing the body through a grainy video image gives the sense of an insect being crushed” (Hastings 2012, quoted in 2014). True, if anything alive, the tiny figures of people in these aerial camera views look like bugs. Their crushing is inconsequential.

Referring to people as bugs dehumanizes them. The artists' statement that they changed the bug-like appearance of humans through the drone cameras claims the purpose of the project is to humanize the people on the ground. And by installing the picture of the little girl in such proportions that she will be seen by the drone operators, the artists hope to foster “empathy and introspection amongst drone operators, and...dialogue amongst policy makers, eventually leading to decisions that will save innocent lives” (2014). Killing people from afar with a drone is almost not real, like a video game. The operators sit in a chair, look at a screen, follow directions, and push buttons on a controller. In fact, drone pilot Lt. Col. Matt Martin writes, controlling a drone through the means of technology is “almost like playing the computer game *Civilization*” (Martin and Sasser 2010, 31, also quoted in 2014). He called it a “surreal experience” (2010, 31). The distance in the mechanics of the drone's operation physically separates the operators a world apart from their targets. It also alienates them from the reality of the attacks, from uncomfortable affect, and negative emotions about the consequences of their strikes.

One of the artists said they wish to “shame drone operators and make them realize the human cost of their actions” (Saifi 2014). Perhaps. Perhaps a drone operator too, coming upon the image of the little girl, which cannot be unseen, will be arrested by her gaze, realize the possible and very real ramifications of the action that is at her fingertips, and consider her role in the war that claims innocent lives. Yet, the chances of this happening is infinitesimal, which reveals the true nature of the installation *#NotABugSplat* as a conceptual piece. The drone cameras are programmed to pick up heat in pursuit of a human target—

they look for live bodies—and unless people are standing nearby, thermal imaging will miss the giant art piece.

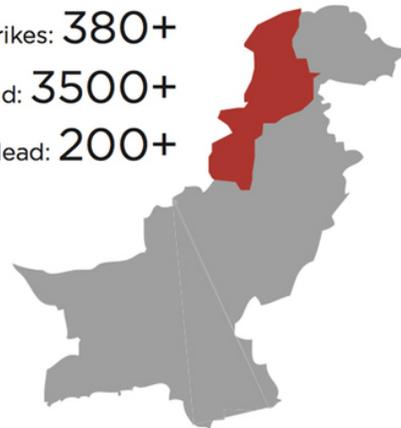


— Humans appear as disposable bugs when viewed through a traditional drone camera.

We changed this.

Now, a drone will see an actual face of a child, creating dialogue and, possibly, empathy.

Drone strikes: 380+
Dead: 3500+
Children dead: 200+



#NotABugSplat team publishes the concept of the project on notabugsplat.com.
Images courtesy of #NotABugSplat team.

Most of the world will not see the installation while on duty looking for a target hooked up to a drone camera. Most people saw the image of the installation, learned the background of the project and the story of the little girl, and absorbed the statistics of collateral damage of drone programs on the internet as I did when the website went viral. In other words, the artist collective

narrated their plight to the global community through the concept of creating awareness among drone operators. By announcing they wish to create empathy with this work, the artists tacitly state to the whole world that the military personnel involved in the drone operations lack empathy.



Children at the installation site look at camera capturing them and at the drone cameras in the sky. Images courtesy of #NotABugSplat team.

The artists also declared their desire for the installation to be captured by mapping satellites and thus become a permanent part of the satellite imagery of the region (2014). When embedded in the satellite images of the area, the installation will mark the region with loss, pain, and grief.

Yet, it's hard to locate the site of the installation on Google Maps. Again the brilliant conceptualization of the installation in an everyday cartographic context

achieves another effect within its global audience. Considering how military zones are censored from public view on such maps, marking otherwise unremarkable, mundane land with the atrocities of war is an extraordinary intervention of civil disobedience. Civilians don't have control over who looks down on them, watches their movements, keeps them in their sights, but using maps as archives transforms people's perception of their own objectification to the eyes above—they have agency over what they show. *#NotABugSplat* performs civil disobedience, not by hiding people from the ever-probing eye-in-the-sky cameras but by choosing what the cameras will see.



The black and white dots on the giant poster laid out in the field look like pixels on a screen. Image courtesy of *#NotABugSplat* team.

This project achieves a couple of other significant acts of resistance by highlighting the choice of the word “bug” in its name. In computer jargon, “bug” refers to a software flaw that causes unintended results. Referring to people as bugs in this sense strips the drone operators of all agency in the harm caused as it implies the innocent weren't supposed to be where the bombs drop. Also, it symbolizes the consideration of civilian casualties of drone operations as

inconsequential; no one counts dead bugs or claims responsibility for their deaths. The use of “bugsplats” for the deaths of civilians eliminates the need to ask questions about the humans killed in the attacks. The art installation *#NotABugSplat* frames the lost lives with the destruction it causes, the politics behind the operations, and the overall lack of accountability—while returning the gaze makes the statement: “we see you, too”—that those behind the drone cameras aren’t invisible.



Local children pose in front of the installation. Image courtesy of *#NotABugSplat* team.



A local boy poses in front of the installation. Image courtesy of #NotABugSplat team.

To most people, it's clear calling casualties "bug splats" dehumanizes them. Putting a single face on the body count accomplishes greater affect than putting multiple faces because it highlights this little girl is a person. More horrifying is their depersonalization. Individual stories disappear when the loss of each life doesn't become even a statistic. Even in massive catastrophes such as genocides, individual stories draw more empathy from unaffected populations. Lack of belonging will detach anyone from a tragedy of a distant group. News and historical accounts of other groups may seem only as real as fiction. Perhaps they even garner less attention than fictive mass tragedies. Ignoring the collective pain of those in outgroups is easier. But it's harder to ignore the plight in the face of another person.



The little brown-eyed girl's photo taken by Noor Behram on the installation.
Image courtesy of #NotABugSplat team.



Screenshot of the homepage of the #NotABugSplat website.

Nonviolent actions and civil disobedience performances often use stillness and silence rather than spoken words to achieve their goals. Through silence and stillness, *#NotABugSplat* performs activism, invokes affective response, and achieves transnational resistance. The internet, through digital media and a social media hashtag-meme, afforded this installation the power of a social movement that peacefully protests. And the fact that they placed a tool of social media, #, as part of the project title manifests their intention.

In other words, the art piece *#NotABugSplat* isn't the installation in a field in Pakistan. It's the website the artists set up spelling out their aims and drone statistics in brief statements next to the photograph of the installation. The website is the event of performance. And the event, *#NotABugSplat*, is complete only with the three elements together, the photograph, the text, and the virtual spectators. The spectators' thoughts on the brilliant and perhaps utopian idea—that the image may change the actions of the drone operators—followed by the realization of its improbability makes the event. The stunning dissemination of affect exposes strength in numbers in the case of global sentiment. State policies are vulnerable to public affect and outcry.

"Victory at the expense of the innocent is no victory at all," proclaims King T'Chaka, the father of the Marvel superhero Black Panther, in the 2016 franchise *Captain America: Civil War*. He is protesting the accidental killing of civilians while the Avengers team of superheroes fought terrorists in Lagos, Nigeria. The movie's plotline is woven around the tension between the rest of the world and the US due to the lives lost during the Avengers' strikes against the villains. Who knows, maybe one of the most popular mainstream movies of the year adopted from Mark Millar's comic book *Civil War* brought forth the theme about the civilian casualties of war because the creators were affected by *#NotABugSplat*. In the end, the project may indeed help eliminate unintended loss of life if the broad protest *#NotABugSplat* ignited causes the state to reconsider the execution of its program. This—fueling policy reform in response to the public discussion emerging in the space the silence and stillness of the art project expands—is the essence of civil disobedience.

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