The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory
Volume 3, Issue 1, 2022
Automating Visuality
www.mast-journal.org
MAST

Bringing Colonialism into the Frame: A Conversation with Heba Y. Amin

Dominique Routhier
University of Southern Denmark

In 2013, Egyptian authorities detained a stork on suspicions of espionage. The stork was equipped with an electronic tracking device that was mistakenly assumed to be a piece of hostile surveillance equipment. To the entertainment of a then recently booming social media public, the story of the overly paranoid Egyptian authorities soon went viral. To the Egyptian artist Heba Y. Amin, whose art project The General's Stork *(2016–ongoing) critically mines this incident, the story of the captive bird reveals something less amusing about how visual technologies leading up to automated drone surveillance have been developed and deployed in a colonial context. Amin's art thus prompts us to fundamentally reconsider the "automation of visuality" by bringing colonialism into the frame.*

DOMINIQUE ROUTHIER: Beginning from your art project *The General's Stork*, could you elaborate on the context of this work and what is it essentially about?

HEBA Y. AMIN: In general, my art and research centers on questions of power in relation to technology and its role in visual representation. I've been investigating the correlation between the development of technology and the political implications of image production in the Middle East and Africa in the last 150 years or so. Broadly speaking, this is the thread that ties my body

of work together, which matured in a meaningful way during the 2011 Egyptian revolution and the years that followed. This was a turning point, when social media and other technological platforms played a big role in allowing us to contextualize the uprisings and politics within a broader history, especially with the massive production of visual material.

In 2013, I started investigating a viral media story about a stork that was captured in southern Egypt and accused of espionage. The story was broadcast by multiple Western media outlets in a tone that, presumably, had something to do with their disapproval of Egyptian politics and the turn of events that had unfolded at that time. The so-called democratically elected leader of the Muslim brotherhood had been overthrown by a second wave of uprisings, and Egypt's revolution was exposing itself as a farce. The spy stork was seemingly instrumentalized to mock the deteriorating political situation.

However, suspicion to the extent of detaining a bird is indicative of something more deeply dysfunctional, and I was motivated to find its source. What I did not know is that it would lead me to uncover the complicated history of aerial imaging technologies and how Middle Eastern landscapes have served as the backdrop for the development of drone warfare since the late nineteenth century. If one considers the whole arc of this narrative and the context of how these technologies were developed, it is not so strange that a bird with an electronic device attached to its body would cause concern. *The General's Stork* is a project that brings these findings together and tells the story of how the bird's-eye view actively transformed and shaped the geopolitics of the Middle East in the last century.

ROUTHIER: There's a related aspect of *The General's Stork*, which is poetically addressed in your video work *As Birds Flying* (2016), namely the question of the "naturalization" of drone warfare (see fig. 1). The stork, obviously, functions discursively as a cipher for the paranoid age

of drone warfare. But in your work, there is a sense in which the saying that "birds of a feather flock together" acquires an uncanny *material* truth, as for instance when you draw attention to the convergence of military and civilian drone engineering trends that model drones on actual, living birds. As a researcher working on these same topics, it can sometimes feel difficult to find a form that can adequately address these historical convergences. Is there a method to your work as an artist?

Fig. 1. 7'11" video still from Heba Y. Amin, As *Birds Flying*, 2016. Image courtesy of the artist and Zilberman Gallery.

AMIN: Drone warfare, colonialism, occupation, and violence are not poetic; they are horrific things. But we need to find ways to relay our humanity and contextualize our contemporary conditions, and art has the power to reveal injustice in affective ways. My research as an artist is driven by visual content which, in many ways, allows me to confront otherwise difficult narratives. We need other ways of engaging with how we want our futures to look and spaces to

nurture discourse on what we consider to be *technological development* and *human progress*, for example. Who wants to live in a world where machines of death simulate beautiful creatures to the point of confusion?

The short allegorical film *As Birds Flying* (2016) speaks to these issues of concern. The stork, of course, becomes the vehicle through which the paranoid age of drone warfare is confronted, but the film also seduces you with beautiful drone footage of what turns out to be the occupied Palestinian landscapes that storks migrate through. It takes its title from a Biblical prophecy from the Book of Isaiah. I made the connection after finding a particularly peculiar portrait of Lord Allenby with his pet marabou stork in his villa in Cairo (see fig. 2). Allenby was the British Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in Egypt in the early twentieth century and is attributed with his successful capture of Jerusalem from the Ottoman Turks in 1917. In keeping with British interests to expand political and economic control over the region as well as to "restore" Palestine to an imagined biblical landscape, Allenby was inspired by the birds in this passage to justify an air assault and colonial take-over of Jerusalem.

Perhaps it is in the nuance of these absurd details that allows one to see history in other ways. Perhaps it will make you laugh before you dwell on your anger, but ultimately it attempts to shake what we understand to be the *truth* through assumed historiographies.

ROUTHIER: Your narrative arc follows the historical metamorphoses from the bird into the drone (and vice versa), and through the example of Lord Allenby and British colonialism you highlight how new technologies are always embedded in broader cultural narratives. In this particular case, part of the justification for the imperialist settler-mentality grew out of Christian religious narratives about divine and vengeful "birds." So, in a sense, you are not merely describing "cultural narratives" but exposing actual, historical frames of war?

Fig. 2. Heba Y. Amin, *The General's Stork I*, 2020: 100 x 80.86 cm, archival color print. Image courtesy of the artist.

AMIN: We know that Lord Allenby was deeply religious and much of his actions were inspired by his Christian convictions. We also know that British colonialism was very much driven by religious ideology: in Palestine, a move towards "British Restorationism" was supported by the idea that the second coming of Christ was only achievable if the British played a role in ensuring that the Holy Land belonged to Jews. There is no doubt that the imperialist settler-mentality grew out of religious narratives, among other motivations. More importantly, how do we expose these historical frameworks to better understand our contemporary context?

The amount of digital content being produced and the relatively new access to digitized historical archives allow us to revisit and reframe history. What I am particularly concerned with is the role that imaging technologies play in shaping ideology, particularly in relation to colonial warfare. The colonial context has, in many ways, been written out of the story of Western technological progress, and I think it is important to bring occupation back into that narrative.

ROUTHIER: Part of your exhibited archive footage includes the first aerial photographs of Palestine and serves as a reminder, among other things, that the bird's-eye view is inextricable from the history of colonization. But more specifically, do you see present-day drone surveillance and new forms of "machinic vision" as structurally embedded in Western universalist perceptions of space?

AMIN: Imaging technologies from the nineteenth century were already being used to justify colonial land grab. Panoramic photography which emerged shortly after the invention of the daguerreotype, for example, was utilized as a tool to visualize the vast scale of territory "available" for occupation on the African continent. Depicting the land as a vast open territory was intended to act upon the desire for the openness of "primitive" African landscapes where a new aesthetic of fantasy geographies was at the core of visualizing the colonial project. German missionary and photographer Carl Hugo Hahn developed a technological device, a camera with a revolving panoramic lens, capable of photographing 180-degree landscapes for the purpose of visualizing this expansive environment. This was intended as an invitation for Europeans to occupy "empty" land.

The view of the world from above, however, introduced a new imagination of territory drawn from the fantasies of colonial ideology. The early twentieth century saw British military interests in aerial technologies which presented opportunities for land expansion in Europe's

territories in Africa and the Middle East. Aerial images, in particular, played a significant role in the desire and fulfillment of Europe's vision of the modern nation-state.

ROUTHIER: How so? By portraying the landscape in which ways?

AMIN: In the context of Palestine, aerial images were used to frame the landscape as empty, human-less, and free for the taking. In this case, it was not only about relaying the primitiveness of landscape and the possibility of superimposing European fantasies on virgin territory. Palestine was of particular interest for its Biblical history, not a land with an existing modern people and society, and therefore depicted as such. The aerial photograph became an extension of utopian thinking, a future world mirroring European (Christian) ideology. Aerial photography was framed as a tool of scientific research, for surveying and imperial cataloguing; "machinic vision" therefore came to represent progress as the bird's-eye view became a symbol of modernity. The narrative of religion combined with the "evidentiary" nature of technology became almost impossible to question.

ROUTHIER: So, do you see this colonial prehistory as embedded in the technical apparatus itself, or in the "universalist" gaze that is constructed through these machines? I'm asking this because one thing I noticed in your works, and really found intriguing, was that you seem to be investigating "vision" in this more fundamental, historically anchored sense. I mean, obviously, many contemporary artists work with visual representations and the question of what is seen and what is *not* seen—I'm thinking more specifically about artists such as Harun Farocki, Trevor Paglen, and Hito Steyerl here—but I get the feeling from your artworks like *Vision is one of the Senses* (2016) through to *The General's Stork* (2016–ongoing) that you are perhaps investigating the question of visuality at a deeper level (see fig. 3)? Is that an objective of yours?

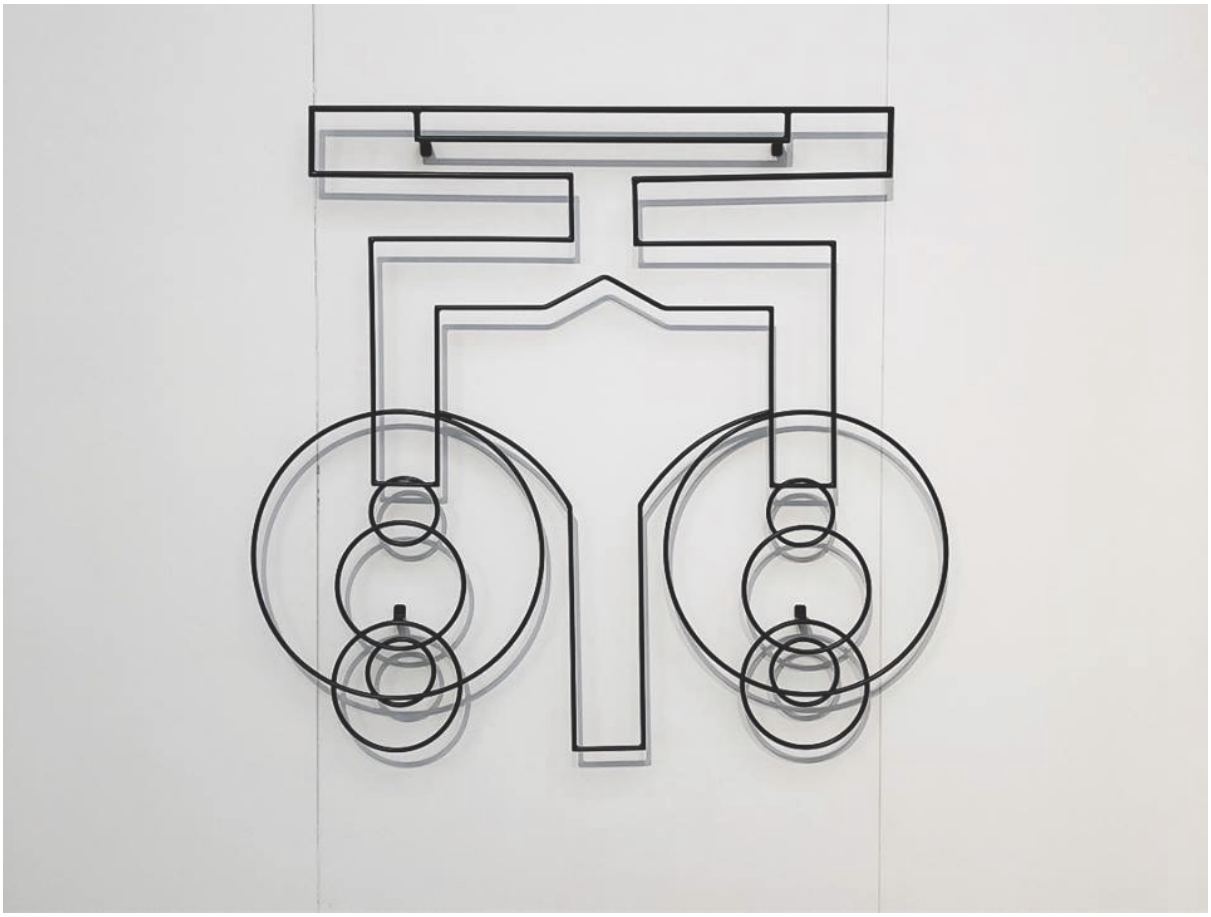

Fig. 3. Heba Y. Amin, *Vision is One of the Senses*, 2016: iron, powder coated, 110 x 120 x 6 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Zilberman Gallery.

AMIN: The colonial history is absolutely vital in contextualizing the role of the technical apparatus. I look at how the earliest photographs of the region were extrapolated from a long tradition of the orientalist gaze. For example, only three months after the invention of the daguerreotype was gifted to the world, French artists rushed to North Africa to capture erotic images of North African women. Due to the inaccessibility of the North African female subject, European artists invented an idea of romance by photographing the native woman to fit their vision, their fabricated delusion. Their image, constructed by the dreamscapes of orientalist painting, was a tool of political propaganda for the colonial project. Sexualized representations

of women came to represent the domination of territory; their exploited bodies merged with the idea of claiming land. Indeed, the technical apparatus emerged from this predatory context of seeing, except now it was validated through the technological lens.

Indeed, I am very much influenced by the artistic practice of Harun Farocki—as well as Trevor Paglen and Hito Steyerl—for their groundbreaking scholarship on "machinic vision." I found that it was also important for me to fundamentally understand how the history of vision has been, and continues to be, narrated through a Western "universalist" perspective.

ROUTHIER: So, by going back in time, you are essentially contesting the historical construction of Western visuality?

AMIN: Precisely. My research on early photography takes a closer look at scientific and philosophical developments on optics and vision dating back to tenth- and eleventh-century Arabic manuscripts. Until recently, these important treatises on optics were essentially written out of history. I discovered that many of the ideas that were attributed to the Renaissance era far preceded it, and that the knowledge that had already been produced and published by that time was usually not acknowledged. Until recently, a scholar like me was often not granted permissions to explore archives in European institutions, and now, with the efforts in digitizing archives, many historical manuscripts are more easily available. While one still has to have the right affiliations, with the right institutions and the right credentials in order to access archives, scholars from the Global South are suddenly privy to parts of their own histories that they've never had access to before.

As a result, the scholarship of the tenth-century Arab thinker and scientist Ibn al-Haytham, for example, is finding its way back into contemporary scholarly discourse. Ibn al-Haytham's groundbreaking manuscript, *The Book of Optics (Kitab al-Manazir)*, made significant scientific

observations about the mechanics of vision and the philosophy of perception. His work was the first to explain vision as a function of the brain; he demonstrated vision by intromission of light rays to the eye rather than rays being emitted from the eye. Furthermore, his book contemplates the manipulative potential of perception at length. For me, this became a potent source for cultural critique.

ROUTHIER: Tellingly, I wasn't familiar with al-Haytham's theories other than by your mentions of him as a source for your optical sculptures. It reminds me of how in the scholarly discourse sometimes referred to as visual studies, the term "visuality" points to a "social fact" (Hal Foster) rather than to the physical processes involved in seeing. An essential mediating component of this compound "social fact" is, of course, technology.

In Dziga Vertov's groundbreaking film, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), the technical apparatus, or the mechanical eye, appears as a world-making apparatus, "freely" distributing its visual coordinates and creating a new world. Since Vertov, much of the Western avant-garde filmmaking tradition has reveled in the artistic affordances of new forms of machinic vision. Today, with the drone, Vertov's "mechanical eye" literally reaches new heights and appears as something like the fulfilment of the avant-garde dream of technical progress. Given what we know, should we be more careful in assessing the "mechanical eye's" so-called objective visual constructs, its alleged capacity for world-building and community-making?

AMIN: I would argue that there is no such thing as the "mechanical eye's" objective visual construct. Even Farocki's notion of "operational images"—where machines speak to machines through "images"—does not function on an objective level in so far as the logic of these technologies and the systems on which they are built stem from racially driven colonial constructs. The history of aerial photography is inherently linked to political cartography and a

vertical power hierarchy that was, and continues to be, strategically enforced through the structuring of space and the policing of bodies from above. In that sense, it is very difficult to look at the development of these technologies and consider them in terms of world-building without recognizing the military and corporate frameworks they serve. Automating visuality, or machine-led forms of image production, become an extension of a system that is already racially deterministic in nature. But it's not just about visuality and image-making, it's also about how the systematic weaponization of imaging technologies has become increasingly normalized through the algorithmic apparatus, especially as we remove ourselves from the responsibility and complicity of image-making.

ROUTHIER: This kind of "genealogical" investigation of yours into vision and visuality seems to me a kind of corrective not just to contemporary art but also, more broadly, to the trajectory of European modern art as such. I mean, if we consider the lineage of avant-garde filmmakers from Vertov through to mid-century high modernists such as Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and other forerunners of Op-art, we find that, for all the intricate aesthetic explorations of the mechanics of vision, there is little to no interest in inquiring into the historicity of the Western image-making tradition and the material construction of the "universal" gaze. Your "optical sculptures" share an aesthetic affinity with these kinds of mid-century sculptures, but I assume that they are intended as a different kind of artistic intervention?

AMIN: My optical sculptures portray the original scientific diagrams from Ibn al-Haytham's *Book of Optics*; they speak to that moment in history when we accurately understood the mechanics of vision. I would say that these sculptures are a critique of the material construction of the "universal" gaze, and a general questioning of perception and knowledge. Whose framework of knowledge? Whose history?

ROUTHIER: This reminds me of your series of self-portraits called *Portraits of Woman with Theodolite (I-III)* which show you posing with an intricate technical apparatus called a "theodolite," which as far as I can tell was originally used for land surveying purposes (see fig. 4)? But visually and aesthetically, these portraits come across as a *détournement* of some iconic portraits of avant-garde filmmakers posing with their camera. Could you tell me a little bit about the context of these self-portraits—and if and how they relate to questions of art historical "representation"?

Fig. 4. Heba Y. Amin, *Portrait of Woman with Theodolite Series*, 2019. Photograph by Markus Rack. Image courtesy of the artist and Zilberman Gallery.

AMIN: These images were made in the spirit of early studio portraiture where the display of technological objects as a representation of human progress was a common photographic theme. The triptych portrays a woman with a technological device (*Portrait of Woman with Theodolite I - II*, 2019) and a woman with the technological device in use (*Survey of German Landscapes by Night (New Morgenthau Plan) I*, 2019). I began to experiment with ways to articulate the power gap between observer and observed, and to make the embedded politics of tools of observation and image-making as transparent as possible.

In 2014, I embarked on a five-month road trip along contemporary migration routes from Africa to Europe with a surveying tool known as a theodolite. By flipping the power dynamics and positioning myself as a *voyeur*, I attempted to magnify the predatory frameworks of African landscapes that have been inscribed in dominant histories. Through the surveying and surveillance of contested territories, the dominant political powers embedded in the landscapes become visible through visual documentation. While the non-human subjects of my images are clearly contemporary, their aesthetics resemble early photographic techniques that regurgitate a colonial logic.

The project is again about the gaze: who is doing the gazing? What does it mean to be the voyeur, to adopt the male gaze? The European gaze? I took a performative approach in embodying the technologies, embodying the archives as a way to better understand the logic of the technical apparatus. By addressing the fundamental act of seeing, my work regards a confrontation of scopic regimes as imperative to a thorough reading of images.

Artist **Heba Y. Amin** engages with political themes and archival history, using mixed-media including film, photography, lecture performance and installation. Her artistic research takes a speculative, often satirical, approach to challenging narratives of conquest and control. Amin is a

Professor of Digital and Time-Based art at ABK-Stuttgart, the co-founder of the Black Athena Collective, curator of visual art for the MIZNA journal, and currently sits on the editorial board of the Journal of Digital War. She was awarded the 2020 Sussmann Artist Award for artists committed to the ideals of democracy and antifascism, and was selected as a Field of Vision Fellow, NYC (2019). Her latest publication, *Heba Y. Amin: The General's Stork* (ed. Anthony Downey) was recently published by Sternberg Press (2020) and her works and interventions have been covered by *The New York Times, The Guardian*, *the Intercept*, and *BBC* among others. Email: hebaamin@yahoo.com.

Dominique Routhier is a Post-doctoral Researcher at the Department for the Study of Culture, University of Southern Denmark. Currently, he is affiliated with the research project Drone Imaginaries and Communities (Independent Research Fund Denmark, 2020-2024). His writings have appeared in *Rethinking Marxism*, *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, *Boundary 2 online*, and *LA Review of Books*, among other places. He is the author of a forthcoming book about the Situationist International (Verso Books, 2023). Email: dominique@sdu.dk.