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Author(s): ALAN INGRAM

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Experimental geopolitics: Wafaa Bilal's *Domestic tension*

ALAN INGRAM

UCL Department of Geography, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT

Email: a.ingram@ucl.ac.uk

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Interest in alternative forms of geopolitics is growing. Frustrated with the apparent limitations of existing critical approaches, geographers are exploring new epistemologies and seeking to forge more practical, constructive and transformative modes of geopolitical intervention. In this article I argue that experimental tactics adopted by contemporary artists open up geopolitics for reflexive interrogation and creative refashioning in ways that are suggestive for alternative geopolitical projects. Particularly suggestive in this regard is Wafaa Bilal's 2007 work *Domestic tension*, in which the artist lived more or less continuously for a month in front of a webcam and paintball gun that could be controlled remotely via the internet. *Domestic tension* is illustrative of four components I identify in experimental geopolitics: the *staging* of geopolitics via the assemblage of a variety of elements; in allowing for these elements to *play* dynamically; in *modulation* of the course of the experiment; and in eliciting emergent effects. While the experimental assemblage of *Domestic tension* readily elicited orientalist violence, diverse practices of critique and solidarity also emerged as people sought to contest this violence. Playing with the fabric of geopolitical space, *Domestic tension* tested the extent to which another geopolitics might be possible.

KEY WORDS: Wafaa Bilal, Iraq, United States, critical geopolitics, alternative geopolitics, experimentality

Introduction

Critical geopolitics emerged as an intellectual project more than 20 years ago, with a call to reconceptualise geopolitics as a discursive practice through which theorists and practitioners of statecraft represented the world, rendering it amenable to particular forms of intervention. The core intellectual and political task for critical geopolitics was thus to deconstruct geopolitical discourses and representations, in the hope of making other kinds of geopolitics possible. The validity and utility of this approach has since been debated extensively, leading to a variety of responses and proposals for rethinking, extending or replacing critical geopolitics.

First, the epistemological basis of 'first wave' critical geopolitics has been questioned, particularly its focus on textuality and representation and its preoccupation with 'the big' at the expense of 'the little'. As a result, geographers seeking to problematise geopolitics have increasingly turned towards an exploration of affect, emotion and performativity and an engagement with the popular, mundane, everyday and the embodied. Second, in ethical-political terms it has been argued that critical geopolitics has been focused

on war and conflict at the expense of a consideration of how to forge a more peaceful world. Preoccupied with the exposure and critique of militarism and violence, it is argued, critical geopolitics has had much less to say in terms of an alternative, progressive agenda. Third, while critical geopolitics has been influential upon parts of international relations and has become the dominant form of critical analysis in geopolitics, there is the criticism that it has remained a largely academic discourse and only rarely been translated into practical, constructive action. These criticisms have emerged from feminist geographers (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2001 2004; Pain 2009) and been echoed and elaborated by interventions from theoretical positions stressing the non-representational, the embodied and the performative (Thrift 2000; MacDonald 2006), issues of welfare and development (Kearns 2008) and from the perspective of peace activism (Megoran 2008 2010; Koopman 2008a 2008b 2010).

Recent proposals for alternative forms of geopolitics bring together these concerns to inform practical geopolitical work. Megoran (2010, 384) argues, 'it is vital that critical geopolitics moves beyond oppositional stances and develops the tools to identify and explore

transformative possibilities for peace'. As he argues in relation to the Reconciliation Walk, an initiative by evangelical American Christians to apologise for the First Crusade, intimate experience and everyday encounters can be fundamental to personal transformation and the reimagination of geopolitics in ways that open possibilities for peace. Sara Koopman (2010, 231) has formulated the concept of alternative or alter-geopolitics as a process of 'creating alternative nonviolent securities'. As she describes, 'Groups doing alter-geopolitics are making connections, often across distance and difference, which focus on the safety of bodies (often by moving bodies) and ground geopolitics in everyday life' (Koopman 2010, 232). International accompaniment, the alternative geopolitical practice described by Koopman where relatively privileged people join more vulnerable others in zones of conflict, thus providing a degree of visibility and protection, relies on bodily proximity and the negotiation of assistance and likewise seeks to create space for peace.

In this article I argue that certain kinds of artistic practice are highly relevant to these epistemological, ethical-political and practical concerns. Indeed, art theorists, critics and practitioners have over the last decade shown a growing interest in geopolitical themes (as illustrative examples, see Arndt et al. 2009; Coulter-Smith and Owen 2005; Deller 2010; Demos 2006 2008 2009; Kluijver 2010; Paglen 2008; Paglen and Solnit 2010; Borchardt-Hume 2011) and geographers have begun to explore how critical approaches to art and geopolitics might intersect (Graham 2010; Gregory 2010). Here I argue that the experimental tactics deployed by contemporary artists open up geopolitics to critical interrogation and creative refashioning in ways that are highly suggestive for alternative geopolitical projects.

Geographical interest in experiments, experimentation and experimentality is also growing (Davies 2010; Powell and Vasudevan 2007). Indeed, there is perhaps an 'experimental turn' underway across the social sciences and humanities as well as in art practice (Fariñas 2009; Thompson and Independent Curators International 2008). What I focus on here is the construction of experimental situations in a rather formal sense. I suggest that it is useful to interpret *Domestic tension* as an experiment involving the construction of particular kinds of situations within which the interaction of various elements can be monitored and modulated in order to produce dynamic effects and transformations (Hacking 1983; Rheinberger 1997). It is, I suggest, illustrative of four constitutive elements of experimental geopolitics: the *staging* of geopolitics via the assemblage of a variety of elements; in allowing for these elements to *play* dynamically; in modulating the experiment so that it takes a particular course; and in eliciting emergent effects. Constructing an experimental geopolitical situation, *Domestic tension* recreated and modified many of the

spatialities evident in geopolitics today. Playing with space, it tested the extent to which another geopolitics might be possible.

The specific formation of geopolitics that *Domestic tension* experimented with has been theorised variously as a dispositif of late modern war (Gregory 2006), a military-industrial-media-entertainment network (Der Derian 2009) and a new military urbanism (Graham 2010). What links these theorisations is the assemblage of high technologies (for example, surveillance, robotics and weapons), political-economic interests (in terms of military and securitarian neoliberalism) and a distinct series of ethnocentric imaginaries and affects [notably those related to orientalism and what Jasbir Puar (2007) calls US homonationalism]. Within this formation are interconnected such diverse phenomena as military operations in urban terrain, remote control warfare, surveillance and weapons technologies, bodily performances and video games. As its critics argue, questioning and contesting the emergence and spread of this formation is central to the meaning of peace and democracy today.

Representing experimental art works within academic journal articles raises epistemological and methodological challenges. The critic Claire Bishop (2006a, 15) has identified several approaches to recording the intent and effects of what are often 'elusive and ephemeral' participatory works: the manifesto, the project description, detailed logs, reflections after the event, dialogues and third person narratives. Here I draw on several such records and accounts: Bilal's account of the background, intent, design and conduct of the work on his website, in media interviews and in a co-authored book (Bilal and Lydersen 2008); photography presented in the book and available online; press interviews and media coverage; daily video diaries posted by Bilal on YouTube during the work; a talk given by Bilal in London in October 2010; and conversation and email correspondence with the artist. Inherent to a reliance on these sources is the problem of giving excessive emphasis to the intentionality and agency of the artist. Here this is offset by drawing on the log from the project's chatroom (from which extracts are reproduced uncorrected). I also draw on posts made on Bilal's YouTube pages (www.youtube.com/user/mewafaa), and on email interviews and correspondence with Bilal's collaborators. While Bilal's agency and intentions are central to *Domestic tension*, this enables the project to be seen in terms of a broader range of intentions, involvements, interactions and effects.

Situating *Domestic tension*

In May 2007, Wafa Bilal entered the FlatFile Galleries in Chicago to conduct what he called a live art installation. In this work, Bilal lived more or less continuously for 1 month in front of a webcam connected

to a paintball gun that could be accessed and controlled via a dedicated web page. Potential participants were invited, or perhaps it is more accurate to say incited, to 'Shoot an Iraqi': to log on, observe and fire the paintball gun at Bilal, while leaving open the possibility that they might choose not to do so. Bilal recorded and posted online a short video diary in which he recounted each day's events. Following a quiet start, the project gained momentum as word spread across the internet. Nine days in, responding to demands from participants, a chat room facility was added to the website. Now people could log on, observe, shoot (or not) and/or post comments, ask questions of Bilal and engage in dialogue with him and others.

Bilal conceived the project in response to his experiences of war and exile and as a commentary on remote control warfare and video games (Bilal and Lydersen 2008). He grew up in Kufa in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime and studied geography at university. Having been arrested and tortured on account of his art and fearing that family ties with regime opponents would compromise his safety, he left the country following the Gulf War of 1991, as government forces moved to eliminate the post-war uprising fomented (but not supported) by the US. Following time in a violent refugee camp in Saudi Arabia, where he continued to make art, Bilal was selected for resettlement to the USA. His acute feelings of estrangement from his family were intensified with the US and British invasion of 2003 and the resulting insurgency. In spring 2004, Bilal learned that his brother Haji had been killed. Men from Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, with whom Haji was close, had pressured him to command an improvised checkpoint on a nearby bridge as US forces approached Kufa. Brandishing an AK-47, Haji had forced his way past family members to take up the post. After the area had been surveilled by an unmanned 'drone' aircraft, the checkpoint was hit by a strike from a US helicopter gunship, killing him. Haji's death had a devastating impact on the family; overwhelmed by grief, Haji and Wafaa's father died 2 months later.

Bilal's art practice responds directly to his experiences and can be located in terms of several contemporary art genres, including installation, live, video and internet art, body art and endurance art. It also aligns in certain respects with the goals of participatory and relational art as they were formulated during the 1990s and 2000s. Heralded as offering new modes of political intervention after the deconstructive dead ends of post-structuralism and post-modernism, a series of artists, curators and theorists reconceptualised art practice in terms of a relational intervention in the world that might activate and engage participants. Though its tactics and claims have been heavily contested (Bishop 2006a 2006b 2006c; Gillick 2006; Radical Culture Research Collective 2007), the goals of relationality, participa-

tion and activation have remained central to Bilal's work.

Following his move to the USA, Bilal focused much of his practice on topics to do with war and religion and, in photographic and video work, he began to use some of the technologies and tactics that would later be deployed in *Domestic tension*. In *The sorrows of Baghdad*, he created an installation that sought to recreate something of the experience of a war zone for the viewer. In *4th of July Celebration*, a video work produced for an exhibition in the Hague, Bilal edited footage of US Independence Day firework celebrations together with video from the 2003 invasion of Iraq (notoriously described by one US reporter as being reminiscent of the 4 July) and in *One chair*, working with Shawn Lawson, he created an interactive video installation that changed depending on the behaviour of the viewer. By the time of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Bilal was already beginning to be recognised within the contemporary art world as a practitioner working provocatively with issues of identity, power and violence via the possibilities of new media.

Experimenting with geopolitics

Domestic tension adopted an avowedly experimental mode and it is possible to conceptualise the project as indicative of a potential field of practice that, echoing Thompson and Independent Curators International (2008), I term experimental geopolitics. I conceptualise this in terms of four elements: staging, play, modulation and effects. *Staging* refers to the setting of initial conditions for an experiment and involves things ranging from practical organisation to aesthetic and art-theoretical decisionmaking and establishing technological infrastructures. It also involves design, in terms of creating an experimental set up that will allow for or elicit particular kinds of events, interactions and effects. *Play* refers to the process of allowing the experiment to run and for components to act, interact, feed back and transform each other. Experimentation is thus not simply simulative but productive and creative. *Modulation* is a further essential element of experimental practice, involving reflexive monitoring and management, fixing things so as to ensure that the experiment continues along a particular more or less defined course. Modulation may thus be a more or less intensive practice, allowing for more or less openness or direction. Finally, experimentation involves the production of *effects*, phenomena which may arise from staging, play and modulation and which may or may not be in some sense novel, interesting or useful.

Experiments in geopolitics put these dynamics to work in relation to the spatialities of power. As much recent scholarship indicates, these spatialities must be theorised as highly complex, particularly when it comes to contemporary interventions undertaken under the rubric of global counter-terrorism and

homeland security. An understanding of power as operating through topological spatiality is particularly useful, with geopolitics enacted at once nowhere (in 'black sites', 'ghost planes' and covert operations) and everywhere (in aspirations for 'total information awareness', 'global watch' and 'global strike' capabilities), but always materialised with greatest force in particular places. Such interventions are assembled not just across space, but through its production as such, in terms of proximity and distance; linkage and separation; orchestration, construction and destruction. It is with this process of assemblage that an experimental geopolitical attitude seeks to play in a consciously designed, open and enquiring manner.

Staging

For Bilal, questions of geopolitics were by no means confined to the realm of theory. Following Haji's death and with continuing violence in Iraq, he had become increasingly troubled by the disconnect between his life in the USA and the experience of his family and compatriots. In early 2007 he saw a TV interview with a US soldier tasked with conducting air strikes in Iraq from a command bunker in Colorado. As he related:

The reporter asked if she had any doubts or remorse about what she was doing. She perkily answered that she trusted the orders and information she got from her superiors . . . It struck me that Haji's death had been orchestrated by someone just like this young woman, pressing buttons from thousands of miles away, sitting in a comfortable chair in front of a computer, completely oblivious to the terror and destruction they were causing to a family – a whole society – halfway across the world.

Bilal and Lydersen (2008, 10)

This topological dissonance – between an ease with observation and violence at a distance on the one hand, and feelings of estrangement from home on the other – was a central factor in the decision to undertake *Domestic tension*. As Bilal elaborates, after he had seen the interview:

I was struck again by the anguish that has plagued me ever since Haji's death; though my consciousness and memories are forever connected to the conflict zone that is Iraq (and so many other war-torn countries across the world), my present reality has become the same comfort zone as this young Colorado soldier's. I have a warm bed in a comfortable apartment, a hot cup of coffee or a pepperoni pizza at a moment's notice, a health club membership, wine and cheese at Friday art openings. I live in complete comfort and security, even when I am constantly worried about my family and my people.

Bilal and Lydersen (2008, 10–11)

This experience of multiple topologies also informed the design of *Domestic tension*:

I realized I had to produce work to address this chasm between the comfort and conflict zones, both to examine the duality in which I exist and to push the limits of understanding of those ensconced purely in the comfort zone . . . I wanted to reach well beyond the normal art world, to have an effect on people from all walks of life who would never step into a gallery or go to an anti-war protest, the rest of the American public who remain disengaged and isolated in their comfort zone.

Bilal and Lydersen (2008, 11)

In a calculated risk, Bilal played overtly on dominant constructions of the other in US geopolitical culture. His intended name for the work was *Shoot an Iraqi*, but Susan, the owner and curator at Flatfile, where Bilal had secured a residency, objected to this, concerned that in the febrile atmosphere of US gun culture, someone might take the title as an injunction to use a lethal firearm against Bilal. While Bilal agreed to her suggested title of *Domestic tension* – a more ambiguous name that alluded to the spaces of home as well as home-land – *Shoot an Iraqi* was still used on initial publicity material. For this Bilal was photographed wearing a keffiyeh. As he records, he also adopted a 'goofy, befuddled expression on my face to make people think, "This silly guy is a terrorist?"' (Bilal and Lydersen 2008, 28). He also sought to draw participants into the work by emphasising its similarities with video games and making the game appear to be 'fun' while setting up 'tensions and questions' for the participant (Bilal and Lydersen 2008, 21). *Domestic tension* thus sought to appeal to the ludic and sadistic as well as the empathic or humanitarian, to pleasure as well as pain, and to a masterful geopolitical gaze as well as plain voyeurism (author talk, 7 October 2010).

Staging the visual and kinetic dimensions of contemporary geopolitics required a complex socio-technical infrastructure. For the gun, camera and web set up, Bilal turned to a friend and collaborator from a robotics and virtual reality seminar at the Art Institute of Chicago. He found a 'cyber-hunting' company in Texas which allowed online visitors to shoot animals with guns controlled via the web, but they declined to participate in the project and no ready-made device could be found. Turning again to friends and colleagues he enlisted help with HTML programming, robotics and welding and assembly. The gun (a standard paintball model) was designed for a safe range of 200 ft but in this work would be fired from around 20 ft. It had to be fixed on a mount that would rotate smoothly to allow aiming, and had to be connected to a motor and control software linked to the web site.

A test of the mechanism during the development phase of the project gave Bilal's collaborators serious concerns about the threat it might pose to his health and welfare. As Dan Miller, who worked with Bilal on constructing the gun turret and firing mechanism, explains:

I admit I had many worries about Wafaa's safety as the design of the mechanism evolved. We decided on using a fairly standard paint gun and building a robotic turret that it could be mounted on . . . One test that made quite an impression was having to test fire the gun on Wafaa in the [Chicago School of Art]'s Electronics and Kinetics fabrication studio. This test made the serious implications of the project dramatically clear, especially when one considers the 30-day duration of the project . . . there was always some worry in the back of my mind about [the] inherent danger of the device we created.

Email interview

The test firing did indeed prove painful ('It hurt so much that tears came to my eyes', Bilal and Lydersen 2008, 24), but instead of wearing the recommended helmet, goggles, full face mask and body armour, Bilal wore only a minimum of protection: a bike helmet (later discarded), goggles and flak vest. Shawn tried to convince him to shorten the project or to leave at night, saying 'I don't want you to die or have a serious mental breakdown' (cited in Bilal and Lydersen 2008, 14). After Dan test fired the gun, he asked if Bilal was OK: 'I bit my lip and said yes. There was no backing out now' (Bilal and Lydersen 2008, 24). As with other instances in which the body of the artist is exposed to harm and transformation, such as the influential work of Marina Abramovic, the corporeality of the artist forms part of the work itself. While in many cases the artist's body is the main, over-riding focus, in *Domestic tension* Bilal's body was placed in relation to a wide assemblage of actors that were also part of the work.

Play

On the opening night, visitors and friends online began to take shots at Bilal using internet-connected mobile phones and computers. At the opening, Bilal was joined by a colleague to discuss a book on digital art in front of the gun/camera, but behind plexiglass shields. The dangers of the project rapidly became apparent when Bilal's shield was punctured by a shot from the gun, 'sending plexi-shrapnel flying':

Friends tried to pass me wine and beer, but I knew I couldn't risk drinking; I was in a conflict zone. One paintball hit hard right on one of the openings in the bike helmet. The impact jarred my skull, and yellow paint dripped down my face behind the visor, stinking of the fish-oil base. I felt woozy for a moment . . .

. . .

One person was shooting constantly from Shabbona, Illinois. 'I hope he's not an adult,' I thought. 'What would make one person shoot so much?' Little did I know that this was nothing compared to what was to come.

. . .

As the reality of what I was getting myself into fully dawned on me, I began to feel incredibly lonely and vulnerable.

Bilal and Lydersen (2008, 30)

Word of *Domestic tension* spread rapidly across the internet. Several days into the project, participants were logging on from Canada, Holland, the UK, Germany, Croatia, Spain, Singapore, Serbia, Bosnia, South Korea, Mexico and Russia as well as the USA (chatlog data). On 18 May, Brian Boyko (2007a) published an article on *Domestic tension* that was listed on the recommendation website digg.com, where it received 1857 recommendations, putting it on the front page.

Domestic tension readily elicited the pleasures and frustrations of remote control violence. But while many participants were comfortable with the terms upon which their participation was solicited ('im gonna gat him'), others were ambivalent ('i don't want to embrace this part of me') and still others rejected them ('My psyche is blistered by this. It's so wrong'). Some wished to hit Bilal, while others thought it OK to aim at objects but not the artist ('i'm here to make a paint mess, not to hit someone').

The play elicited by *Domestic tension* – between online participants, Bilal and the technological infrastructure linking them – is illustrated in the following chatlog extract. On 17 May, '20' – numbers from IP addresses were often used as identification – began posting abuse about someone using another address ('65') who had been firing continuously for several hours, taking over 2000 shots, but without posting any comments. Just before 9 pm Chicago time, Bilal sought to engage '65' in dialogue. In the following, '126' is Bilal and '133' is Jason, who was providing Bilal with technical support and, like Bilal's other friends and colleagues, had become concerned for his welfare. The chat is joined part way through by another participant, '67':

- 126 WB: Hey 65 . . . this is wafaa I am having dinner and your paintballs re falling in to it.
- 65 ouch, sorry about that
- 65 I liked the targets
- 133 Cool it a bit. You shot at least 50 times this hour
- 20 65 = SCUM
- 65 it's interesting to see that some people try to actually move the camera away from people shooting
- 126 Columbus what is your name?
- 20 (scum)
- 126 this is wafaa I am having dinner in-

20 Luke
 126 my home and you are shooting me.
 133 Luke has been shooting the gun for 4 hours.
 20 Luke is spastic
 65 not constantly . . .
 133 I take that back, Luke has been shootin the gun since noon. tsk tsk
 65 not exactly since, I was on lunch break
 126 I know Columbus, Luke has been shooting since 1 pm
 65 but I have been checking every so often
 67 there were people shooting you from nicaragua
 65 and of course with that gun button, shooting also
 67 earlier today
 126 how would you feel if someone come to your home and shoot you for no reason?
 67 but wafaa you have given them a reason
 65 but this isn't the same situation exactly
 65 I wouldn't go shoot someone in their house
 67 wafaa, you can't present an aesthetic project like this and then expect people to understand your moralizing at the fact that they are shooting at you
 65 ooh, that log is cool
 67 I like what you are doing, i really think it is historical, but your reactionary and critical approach is a little less intelligent
 65 10 Math.floor(Math.random()*240) is too long ^_~
 67 than the project itself.
 67 if you read this raise your hand so I know you are listening
 133 Wafaa gets really irritated if you treat him like a puppet.

In this extract we gain a glimpse of the experimental assemblage in motion; of how the relations of violence and distance induced by *Domestic tension* began to be contested; and of how participants were reflexively aware of the experimental assemblage itself.

Though he had placed printed targets around the living space in front of the camera and gun (a further incitement to shoot), Bilal had responded to the incessant firing of one participant by self-consciously positioning himself in front of the gun and camera with his

food (artist talk, London, 7 October 2010) and likening the situation to a home invasion. Through this tactic of non-violent resistance, '65'Luke was drawn into discussing the way he had been participating, but rapidly digressed onto the fact that other participants were trying to keep the gun pointed away from Bilal, before moving on to the technical dimensions of the project, commenting on the script running the gun. Others interposed themselves between shooters and Bilal, speaking to and for the artist. They dropped into the conversation to observe the geography of shooters (the shooting log, with IP address and location, was also visible on the web page) and then to criticise the project, arguing that its incitement to shoot invalidated any critique of violence. Bilal went on to contest this argument, which he held misunderstood the rationale of the work.

By the end of 31 days, the web page had received some 80 million hits from 136 countries, more than 65 000 shots had been fired with the gun and the chat room, installed part way into the project, had logged over 65 000 lines of postings.

Modulation

Hacking (1983) suggests that the hardest part of any experimental enterprise is getting the apparatus to function as intended, so that it reliably produces the situations and events that are the intended subjects of the experiment. In *Domestic tension* we see this in what I term the modulation of the work by Bilal and his collaborators. *Domestic tension* was conceived as an open, dynamic work that would evolve in response to the manner in which people participated. But many of the deviations and disruptions to the course of the project went beyond what had been envisaged or planned for, and threatened to take things off course altogether. Some of these deviations were productive while others were disruptive. Some were incorporated into the operation of the work as a means of enriching it, while others had to be negotiated as barriers or problems. Overall, the experiment required the work of continuous monitoring, repair and channelling.

One of these modulations was the chat room itself. This was not part of the original project design, but was installed in response to demands from participants, who wanted to communicate with Bilal. As we have seen in the extract above, Bilal then began to use the chat room facility to add a further layer of dialogue and interaction into the project. The chat room was also used by Bilal's collaborators to communicate remotely with him. When it was targeted by bot attacks, they responded, writing code in order to prevent reoccurrences and blocking access by problematic participants. In time, Bilal withdrew from the chat room, in part to avoid interfering with the spontaneous interactions that were emerging there.

There were also issues with the functioning of the project's technology. The servers running the webcam,

gun, web site and chat room crashed several times, overwhelmed by demand, and had to be upgraded. It was only with help volunteered by an IT professional that the project was able to keep up with escalating demand for participation (Boyko 2007b). While the robotic gun had been configured to fire single shots, programmers – whom Bilal identified as being located within the Massachusetts Institute of Technology – hacked the software controlling it, reconfiguring it for rapid fire, effectively turning it into a machine gun. There was a dramatic spike in firing and chat room activity, which now totalled hundreds and thousands of individual events every 24 h. As well as inflicting heightened trauma on Bilal, which he made evident in his video diaries, this rapidly depleted the paintball supply. Finding cash to continue purchasing ammunition and negotiating with potential suppliers (some of whom were unwilling to be associated with the project) was a constant challenge. Under heavy use the gun broke down and had to be repaired and then replaced. According to Bilal:

There were all sorts of technical considerations we learned as we went along. The gun needed to be lubricated and the barrel cleaned out regularly, or else the paintballs would fly in unpredictable and dangerous trajectories. Dan [Miller, one of Bilal's collaborators] built and tested the gun in the Institute's kinetic lab and his own studio, and he was ultimately able to program it to move smoothly, making barely a sound, only a muted click as it turned. He noted that making machines work silently is usually a goal, but with the gun it had the sinister side effect of creating a stealth weapon.

Bilal and Lydersen (2008, 20)

While Wafa's possessions in the project space were targeted and destroyed, the gallery space itself also underwent degradation. As paint dripped over electrical equipment and gathered in pools, Susan became concerned about the risk of electrocution and fire. Repeated paintball impacts and saturation began to wear through walls, which Bilal tried to patch up and repair. The project space, once a pristine white, became yellow from the paint, recording thousands upon thousands of paintball impacts.

The process of modulation extended to Bilal's own body, affect and conduct. The incessant firing quickly took a toll on him and he reported difficulty in moving around the space and in sleeping, as well as symptoms of anxiety and stress. Over the course of the project Bilal suffered and commented upon wide swings in mood and energy level. At one point he interrupted filming of a diary entry so as not to display his distress. Having taken multiple paintball hits, he began to constrain his movement around the project space so as to avoid being struck as much as possible. At night he took to strapping himself to his bed so as not to sit up inadvertently into the firing line. On one level, the impact of the project on Bilal's body repre-

sents an effect; but the manner in which Bilal self-consciously emphasised and fed these effects back into the project is also a form of modulation, a way of shaping its course that highlights the reflexivity of the experimental situation.

Bilal and his collaborators' accounts of the work of modulation also highlight the extent to which monitoring, maintenance and repair are essential not just to an experimental apparatus but to geopolitical assemblages much more widely. Without such care, tinkering and labour, the socio-material and socio-technical relays ordering geopolitics in a particular way cease to function or start to function differently.

Effects

In a recent discussion with the philosopher Simon Critchley, the artist and film maker Alfredo Jaar (Morris 2011a, 2011b) takes issue with the idea that art might unwrap some of the screens or veils through which the experience of reality is mediated. As he argued:

To tear away one or two of these screens would certainly help, Simon, I agree, but it will not be enough. It is never enough as we cannot represent reality, we can only create new realities. That is what we do as artists or cultural producers: we create new realities.

Morris (2011b)

Drawing on this argument, I briefly consider some of the realities – or emergent effects – induced by *Domestic tension*.

The first might be called the reality effect of the project itself. Numerous chat room participants criticised the work for what they saw as its fakeness. Many were frustrated by the graininess of the webcam, the clunkiness of the gun controls and the frequent failure of Bilal to present himself as target in the expected manner. For some, *Domestic tension* was 'just' an art project, where Bilal was shielded from any real harm or stakes. After all, as posters commented, he was not really in front of the gun continuously, paintballs don't really hurt and in any case he had installed plexiglass shields and was wearing body armour and goggles. A 'real' test, for some, would be to live in front of the camera, get rid of the shields and body armour and to allow oneself to be struck at will. One chat room participant continually hectored Bilal with a challenge (which he declined) for them both to spend time together under these conditions. For some, who dropped in and rapidly dropped out again, the project was truly distant from the battlefield, a curio or a pointless exercise while 'real' war was taking place elsewhere. But this is a kind of reality effect: the constructed nature of the experiment – its reality as an artificially constructed project – emphasises what it is that constitutes the alleged 'reality' elsewhere.

The second reality effect may be discerned in the geopolitical pleasure taken in exercising violence

against Bilal, who was often cast as a racialised and sexualised other. As soon as the chat room became operational, abusive comments began to be posted. While it is problematic to reproduce racialised, homophobic and sexualised writing, I suggest that here it is necessary in order to see how this articulates with a series of imaginative geographies at work in the war on terror more generally and what it was that others came to contest: 'let's shoot this terrorist like a nigga', 'terrorist nigga', 'paki, raghead, nigga, all need lining up and shot', '... don't forget the jews too', 'shoot that fucker', 'fuckin iraqis', 'shoot the coons chair/he's not a "coon"/wtf do you know about dune coons?'. Many participants used the chatroom to issue commands to Bilal: 'stand on the bed', 'come out let me shoot you in the groins', 'hey bitch come out and play', 'wake up you lazy coont!' Participants drew links – often approvingly and jokingly – to events at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, which at that time were under intense debate and politico-legal contestation. While some denied its reality, *Domestic tension* seduced other participants into the aesthetics of the battle zone and torture room all the same. While significant, this effect indicates further questions: if this violence is enjoyed as real, is this an indication of the inherent violence of a dominant geopolitical culture or merely a form of play of the kind that might be enjoyed in video games, without necessary implications for life outside? Following critics of the 'MIME-network', I suggest that it is in the very indistinction between the ludic and the geopolitical that geopolitical culture is reproduced and propagated.

What I would like to emphasise most, however, is a further emergent reality effect, which saw the event of *Domestic tension* become an occasion for the production of alternative securities: a pacific geopolitics. Here the work was taken by participants to be part of a broader geopolitical predicament that required an urgent, non-violent response.

Participants immediately began to contest violent language in the chat room ('Juvenile males make those comments for attention', 'Ok ENOUGH TROLLS!') and the constant firing ('Cool it'). For 3 days, in the manner already exemplified, '20' reposted the IP addresses of people who were shooting along with their town and US state or country and a word of abuse (beginning with '=SCUM' and branching out into other epithets). Many posters urged Bilal to 'take care' and expressed support and admiration for the project. Early on, some participants began to access the gun controls in order to keep it pointing left, away from him ('i'm running script to keep gun going left..fuckers' resulting in responses such as that of '65' above, or 'who keeps clicking to the left?!?'). A group adopting the name 'virtual human shields' formed in order to try to protect Bilal. Jason, the IT professional who assisted Bilal, continued to watch out for him. As Bilal describes:

Jason boasted that the project wouldn't have survived more than 10 days without him, and he's right. I had no idea at the beginning how many people would take shots at me, but Jason knew the cyber and gaming communities well, and he knew this would be a magnet for the aggression and curiosity of the online hordes. He also knew how malicious and cruel people could become in the anonymous world of the internet, and he took it upon himself to monitor my mental state. When he saw a YouTube posting where I was distraught, depressed or drained, he would call me immediately to try to lift my spirits.

Bilal and Lydersen (2008, 49)

People living within the Chicago area reached out to Bilal, visiting the gallery and offering food, clothing and other forms of support. In one video, a friend called Meredith sits and has lunch with Bilal in front of the gun but behind a screen, as the gun fires, and describes what to her is the strange unreality of the experience. In another instance, recorded partly in another video diary, Bilal was greatly moved by a visit from an ex-marine called Matt, who brought in a replacement lamp for one that had been targeted and broken by shooters. Matt explained:

I was watching the camera this morning I saw the lamp went out so I had some time I thought I'd run to Target. Got a new lamp and some new light bulbs. I know sometimes you need all the help you can get even, in a situation like this. I thought I'd bring that by just help you out a little.

Day 11 video

Following this visit Bilal stated, 'A story like this it really warmed my heart and gave me hope. So, Matt, thank you very much for your thoughtful act and I look forward to talk to you more at some point' (Day 11 video). In the face of violence and abuse, Bilal gave great emphasis to such support, while also reflecting on its gendering. He wryly describes how Susan, the gallery owner, would check up on him and wash his laundry, hoping her other artists would not find out. He also notes how chat room participants would engage in sexual mockery when he received visits from women and his discomfort at this, as someone who wished to contest masculine domination (Bilal and Lydersen 2008).

Having received a peace lily sent by supporters, Bilal stated 'Hope is alive' (Day 30, described in Bilal and Lydersen 2008, 157). After receiving a visit from a woman who, having noticed that the socks he was wearing did not match, brought him a new pair, Bilal said, 'This is a happy time and I'm sure happy to be a part of this community' (Day 26 video). At the end of the final day, Bilal said:

it's fantastic to think and reflect and the whole idea has reinforced my belief in humanity, in human kindness, so

thank you for keeping the hope alive and please keep the conversation going.

Day 31 video

With this statement, Bilal made a final modulation, giving a shape to an effect of the project that had not been envisaged or designed at the outset. In this way, Bilal highlighted a network of connections that had emerged during the course of the project, encompassing collaborators who had watched out for him, 'virtual human shields', people who sent gifts through the post and locals who visited in person, bringing food, friendship and support. This is very far from the stuff of orthodox geopolitics, which is axiomatically concerned with the big picture, big actors and big events. By contrast *Domestic tension* did not simply bring focus to the little things, the every day, the emotional and the embodied; it rather inverted the constitutive scalar hierarchy of geopolitics itself. It rendered the small big and the mundane profound, and thereby enacted the possibility of a more pacific geopolitics.

Conclusion: *Domestic tension* as alternative geopolitics

In an influential thesis on the critical potential of contemporary art tactics, Jacques Rancière (2006a 2006b 2010) argues that the critical potential of art derives from a constitutive ambiguity in its relationship to life, where art works can appear simultaneously as both autonomous (as part of a realm that functions according to its own logics and criteria) and heteronomous (as coincident with and immersed within everyday life). Critical projects that insist in either the autonomy of the artwork or its supercession, he argues, evacuate art of its radical uncertainty, and its potential collapses. Instead, borrowing from and blurring distinctions between the realm of art and the realm of life – playing upon ambiguity and indistinction between art and politics – allows artistic acts to intervene in the constitution of the political by reshaping what is visible, sayable and doable. Rather than supplying 'rebellious impulses' for politics or taking leave of themselves (Rancière 2010, 149), artistic practices may serve to enlarge the space of the possible. In Rancière's argument, effective critical art today is that which 'questions its own limits and powers and refuses to anticipate its own effects' (2010, 149). While contributing to a new landscape of the common, it may also serve to corroborate actions in the sphere of politics proper.

This logic is evident in many recent artworks that seek to place the geopolitical in question by playing with space. Examples might include Jeremy Deller's work *It is what it is* (in which he toured the wreck of a car destroyed in a 2007 truck bombing in Iraq around the USA), Fiona Banner's *Harrier and jaguar* (in which the artist installed decommissioned military

aircraft in the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain), Trevor Paglen's explorations of military (in)visibility and the Otolith Group's film *Nervus rerum*, which seeks to problematise the politics of visuality in the Jenin refugee camp and which, as Demos (2009) argues, explores a 'right to opacity'. Such works interfere with the material complexity of geopolitics and refuse to offer clear solutions. However, by virtue of its formal experimentality, *Domestic tension* went a little further than this.

In his discussion of the experimental practices of Louis Pasteur, Bruno Latour (1988) places great emphasis on what he calls the *strange topologies* generated by the skilful construction of the laboratory. When deployed artfully, the laboratory effects a series of displacements and inversions, Latour argues, that enable the experimenter to reverse the forces operating in a society of things. While in nineteenth century France the microbes were 'big' and 'powerful', in Pasteur's lab the order of battle was reversed; Pasteur was big and the microbes became small. Having achieved this favourable disposition of forces, and replicating the contest between microbes and host organisms over and over, Pasteur was able to achieve powerful effects within an emerging regime of experimental truth, establishing a position that served in turn as a fulcrum upon which France and French imperialism were reordered.

In Bilal's lab, the balance of forces operating within geopolitics today was also altered. Weapons were rendered less deadly. Communications infrastructures – and thus the ability to speak and to represent experience – were rendered more equitable and open. The vulnerable target was surrounded not by a war zone but by a zone of Western urban life, within which some respite and comfort were available. The period of violence, though extended, ended definitively. At the same time, for the experiment to function, meaningful risks were taken, with health and wellbeing and with cultural politics. Conflictual dynamics were set in motion in order to see what would happen. Regular experimental effects were produced.

Domestic tension reassembled contemporary geopolitics in the form of an experimental artwork. Bringing elements of the technological infrastructures of remote control warfare and videogames to bear on an embodied geopolitical subject who was empowered to articulate his experience and communicate with others, *Domestic tension* translated, mobilised and inverted a number of the dynamics operating in geopolitics today. In this respect the work was remarkable enough, offering a striking counterpoint to orthodox geopolitical perspectives and performances. But the meaning and relevance of such practices for the project of alternative geopolitics is not limited to opposition, resistance or critique. The formal experimentality of *Domestic tension* allowed alternative geopolitical practices to emerge. Among the unanticipated outcomes of the work may be highlighted the

creation of fleeting moments of peace and the emergence of a spontaneously self-organising protective network, within which Bilal made space to stage an entry into community. In this way, it offered a kind of corroboration to the contention that another geopolitics is possible.

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