



NO DRONES



*Louise Lawler. No Drones. 2011.
Installation view.*

MIGNON NIXON

It is a queer experience, lying in the dark and listening to the zoom of a hornet, which may at any point sting you to death. It is a sound that interrupts cool and consecutive thinking about peace. Yet it is a sound—far more than prayers and anthems—that should compel one to think about peace.

—Virginia Woolf, “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”

1. *Doodlebugs*

Hitler deployed the first pilot-less flying bombs, the doodlebugs, as weapons of terror over London. “The drone of the planes,” Virginia Woolf related, is “like the sawing of a branch overhead. Round and round it goes, sawing and sawing.” It falls to the civilian under aerial attack to “fight with the mind” by “thinking against the current, not with it.” Thinking in darkness, thinking in bed, thinking with the unconscious—Woolf defends the supposedly “futile activity of idea-making” as a counterpoint to the drone of war.¹

Artistic resistance to war is often faulted for its futility. It is as if artistic responses to war succeeded only in stripping art, and its audience, of their political dignity. All antiwar art is not equally scorned, of course. Documentary and

1. Virginia Woolf, “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” (1942), in *Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 1. First published in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. Commenting on “Living Under Drones,” a recent Stanford/New York University report on the effects of American drones on the civilian population of Waziristan, Clive Stafford Smith compares them to the flying bombs that menaced London in World War II: “When the doodlebugs (as VIs—Hitler’s drones—were called) came over,” he observes, citing the experience of his own mother, the buzzing of the engine signaled temporary reprieve; sudden silence meant imminent death. The droning sound became a weapon of terror in itself, as it has in Waziristan, where “the Predators emit an eerie sound, earning them the name *bangana* (buzzing wasp) in Pashtu.” Clive Stafford Smith, “Drones: The West’s New Terror Campaign,” *Guardian* (September 24, 2012). <http://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2012/sep/25/drones-wests-terror-weapons-doodlebugs-1> (accessed January 30, 2014).

activist modes may be counted as extensions of journalism and politics. Memorializing and witnessing gestures bear the import of history. Protest art defies authoritarian repression. And while any of these may be dismissed as naïve or ineffectual, a special contempt is reserved for those modes of artistic resistance that refuse or mock the rhetoric of war.²

Woolf furnishes some reasons. War is not an event that suddenly comes along, she explains. It is already here. “The desire to dominate and enslave” defines everyday life, she writes, and the prevention of war, like war itself, therefore begins at home, with ourselves.³ In her expansive text of 1938 on the prevention of war, *Three Guineas*, Woolf argues that the cleavage of public and private spheres is the foundational violence of militarism, placing war beyond reach of the everyday.⁴ War as we know it is a ruse of militarism, in other words.

Louise Lawler’s sly interventions in contemporary war discourse underscore this point. Apart from an extensive body of work on American militarism, culminating in her 2011 exhibition *No Drones*, the artist’s antiwar ephemera and non-works (including the double-page spread that opens this essay) resist the efforts of militarism to monopolize and mystify war, to cut it off from the everyday. Woolf sharpened her pen on the spectacle of militaristic display, the frippery and finery on parade in military, parliamentary, and academic pageantry alike. Lawler trains her attention on the rituals of the art world, implying that militarism runs through them like a steady line, smoothly connecting the dots. At the same time, her art reveals another trend of militarism, which is the colonization of daily life, the relentless intrusion of state violence into our so-called private lives. To expose the ruse of militarism, Lawler suggests, we must open our eyes to its most intimate and most insidious effects.

Militarism distinguishes “war inside” (as Gertrude Stein referred to our birthright of destructiveness) from “war outside,” the violence of the state. Predicated on a fastidious separation of subject and state, militarism cultivates our sense of estrangement from war, discounts our insider knowledge, and discourages questions like the one Stein recollected from childhood in her 1945 memoir *Wars I Have Seen*: “What is it inside in one that makes one know all about war?”⁵ For Stein, war is always already part of one, inside one. The mystery of war is that it lays its claim on us from the inside out.

2. An example of such contempt is the critical response to Yayoi Kusama’s performances against the nuclear arms race and the American war in Vietnam. Mignon Nixon, “Anatomic Explosion on Wall Street,” *October* 142 (Fall 2012), pp. 3–25.

3. Woolf, “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid,” p. 3. Woolf’s prolific insights about the continuities of tyranny and destructiveness in everyday life and in war underpin much essential feminist writing on war culture. See, for example, Rosalyn Deutsche, “Un-War: An Aesthetic Sketch,” in this issue.

4. Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own/Three Guineas*, ed. Michèle Barrett (London: Penguin, 1993).

5. Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (1945; London: Brilliance Books, 1984), p. 9. On Stein’s war memoir and contemporary artistic responses to war, see Mignon Nixon, “War Inside/War Outside: Feminist Critiques and the Politics of Psychoanalysis,” *Texte zur Kunst* 17, no. 68 (December 2007), pp. 65–75; and Rosalyn Deutsche, “Un-war: An Aesthetic Sketch,” in this issue.

2. Drones

“Wars. So many wars. Wars inside and wars outside.” This line carries the cadence of Stein, but it is actually Bruno Latour, in a lecture delivered in the spring of 2003, some two weeks after the U.S.–U.K. invasion of Iraq. He begins to list the wars. “Culture wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance.” Then he comes straight to the point: “My question is simple. Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals?”⁶ Latour could almost be channeling Woolf now, except that she would never have associated herself with “the scholars, the intellectuals,” whose vanities she read as symptoms of militarist culture. The difference tells when Latour abruptly pivots to what he calls his worry: “Quite simply, my worry is that we might not be aiming for the right target.” With this swerve from the question of whether we, the self-professed thinkers, should also be at war to the worry that we might simply have the wrong target in our sights, Latour abandons the question of intellectual and psychical responsibility for war in order to embrace the very symmetries between academe and militarism that Woolf decries. “To remain in the metaphorical atmosphere of the time,” he remarks, “military experts constantly revise their strategic doctrines, their contingency plans, the size, direction, and technology of their projectiles, their smart bombs, their missiles; I wonder why we, we alone, would be saved from those sorts of revisions.” For Latour, what counts is to be rhetorically current, or “in the metaphorical atmosphere” of one’s time, and to be quick to recognize “new threats, new dangers, new tasks, new targets.” Once upon a time, he reminds us, “intellectuals were in the vanguard.”⁷ The cultural avant-garde not only kept up with rhetorical change but set the pace. Now it is the military-scientific-industrial complex that drives the agenda.

Woolf, by contrast, makes a virtue of hesitation and delay. “Three years is a long time to leave a letter unanswered,” she announces in the arch opening line of *Three Guineas*, “and your letter has been lying without an answer even longer than that.”⁸ Setting aside the abundant appeals that pile up on her desk, waiting for more dust to gather before lifting her pen, the author ruminates at leisure before replying at length to a question styled, in the now familiar way, to flatter prospective patrons of a new society: “How in your opinion are we to prevent war?” Woolf’s response runs to some two hundred pages in small type. “It is true that many answers have suggested themselves,” she confides, “but none that would not need explanation, and explanation takes time.”⁹

6. Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004), p. 225. First presented as the Stanford presidential lecture, Stanford Humanities Center, April 7, 2003. Subsequent references are to p. 225 except where noted.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

8. Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own/Three Guineas*, p. 117.

9. *Ibid.*

A twenty-first-century Woolf, one imagines, would not “donate now” to stall next week’s war or circulate an online petition to her address book with an urgent personal message. It is difficult to conjure her tweeting advice to the prime minister: to bomb or not to bomb. Offered opportunities to sign a petition, attend a political meeting, and donate to a fund, she declines all three. Belated as it is, Woolf’s thick, chiding letter to the founder of the new society does not conclude by enclosing a check. Instead, it promises a guinea for the rebuilding fund of a women’s college. The prevention of war, she reasons, rests on a new model of education, one not beholden to the arms industry. She imagines a “poor college,” experimental and nonhierarchical, with a curriculum devoted not to “the arts of dominating other people” (which “require too many overhead expenses”) but to “the arts of human intercourse.”¹⁰

Latour’s call to academic arms is an exercise in devil’s advocacy, to be sure. Yet it touches on a real problem: how does critique adapt to a war footing? Suggesting that the humanities have an obligation to move with the times, “to press ahead, to redirect our meager capacities as fast as possible,” he charges the humanities, and himself, with debunking and deconstructing while Rome burns.¹¹ Latour borrows yet another military analogy, that of “fighting the last war,” to diagnose the malaise in which the humanities, circa 2003, were plunged. For military doctrine has it that war, unlike history, does not repeat itself. “Would it not be rather terrible,” he wonders, “if we were still training young kids—yes, young recruits, young cadets—for wars that are no longer possible . . . leaving them ill-equipped in the face of threats we had not anticipated, for which we are so thoroughly unprepared?”¹²

When Latour extolled the superior competence of military experts who constantly revise “the size, direction, and technology of their projectiles,” the current wars were in their infancy. Since then, it has become de rigeur for the humanities to court legitimacy in a culture of techno-militarism, even as the credibility of that culture has inexorably declined. Close to home, militarist thinking is detectable even in some revisionist histories of postmodernism, which reduce those debates to abstract culture wars, and in a broad revival of fantasies of mastery that feminist, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist work had once discredited. The prospect of a humanist academy on the militarist model—a drone academy—seems rather different now. Even as a rhetorical weapon, the smart bomb seems disastrously ill equipped to alleviate the cultural malaise of anti-rationality bordering on nihilism that Latour warned against back then and that has only deepened in our prolonged time of war. Rather than restrain us, “the scholars, the intellectuals,” from “add[ing] ruins to ruins”—by which Latour intended the absurdist gesture of reflexively invoking deconstruction in a public discourse already conducted under

10. Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own/Three Guineas*, p. 155.

11. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” p. 226.

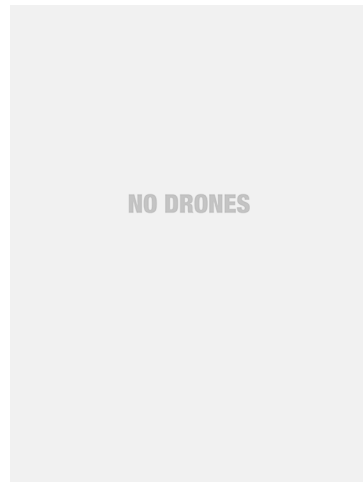
12. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

the sway of the death drive—today’s drone culture has conferred on Latour’s rhetoric a tragic reality. To the extent that we in the humanities are willing to assume responsibility for the current wars, the question “is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins?” can no longer be deemed safely rhetorical.¹³ The “young recruits, young cadets” of the current generation have assimilated the streamlined training regimes dedicated to applying “meager capacities as fast as possible” to urgent contemporary debates, as Latour admonished. But at what cost? Have we inadvertently conspired to abet a techno-militarist fantasy of the humanities themselves as a “fresh ruin,” a ruin overdue for being added to the “field of ruins”?¹⁴

3. No Drones

Posted on the door of my office at the Courtauld Institute of Art is a tattered souvenir from Louise Lawler’s 2011 London exhibition *No Drones*. A few eyebrows were raised when the poster went up. Its pale and faintly shimmering echo of “No Nukes”—a political slogan that lingers on the fringes of British protest culture—offered an uncomfortable reminder of past failure. And that was part of the point: War is retro, however futuristic it appears. When artistic resistance to war summons the past, it reminds us of this. The posting of *No Drones* was also intended as one small way of highlighting the nexus of militarization, art, and the humanities in the everyday life of an academic institution. It was, of course, not only the students I was addressing but, more particularly, myself.

In November 2011, Lawler’s exhibition *No Drones* coincided (coincidentally) with a retrospective of Gerhard Richter at Tate Modern.¹⁵ Lawler in effect transferred two works by Richter, *Mustang Squadron* (1964), based upon a photograph of Allied bombers over Germany, and *Skull* (1983), to the Sprüth Magers gallery at the dead end of an elegant Mayfair street. Printed on



*Announcement
for No Drones.
Sprüth Magers,
London. 2011.*

13. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” p. 225.

14. For an example of how the eclipse of the humanities by the sciences has become academe’s new “worry,” see, for example, Tamar Lewin, “As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry,” *New York Times* (October 30, 2013). <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/education/as-interest-fades-in-the-humanities-colleges-worry.html> (accessed January 30, 2014). Stanford University, where Latour gave his 2003 lecture at the Humanities Center, is one of the campuses described as particularly worried.

15. Lawler was not responding directly to Tate Modern’s Gerhard Richter exhibition and was not aware it would coincide with her own. Conversation with the author, October 10, 2012.



Lawler. No Drones. 2011.
Installation view.

adhesive vinyl and applied directly to the gallery walls, Lawler's photographs of these works, taken during the installation of Richter's work in the Albertinum Museum/Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, in 2010, were manipulated—adjusted to fit, in Lawler's description—to make them strictly proportional to the site.¹⁶

Titled *No Drones* and *Civilian*, the two works took on fresh political import as an extension of Richter's own procedure in retrieving and enlarging photographs of the bombing of Germany during World War II. Drawing on photographs of a recent past that had already been effectively repressed, Richter pointed to a process of historical forgetting: His photographs were reminders of a "last war" that was briefly imagined to mark the end of wars. By applying optically distorted, or stretched, editions of her own photographs of Richter's paintings in Dresden, the site of frenzied Allied bombing of civilians, to a gallery wall in London, the city where Hitler deployed the first unmanned drones, Lawler invited reflection on the extent to which the remembrance of wars past shapes the dynamics of our own current wars. In particular, the installation invited reflection upon aerial destruction as a preeminent mode of cultural domination and control.

"Dresden was the Florence of Germany," Sven Lindqvist has written, "an old cultural capital, full of art treasures and architectural masterpieces that the bombing had left untouched throughout five years of war. So the city was full of

16. On Lawler and Richter, see *Louise Lawler and/or Gerhard Richter: Photographs and Works*, ed. Dietmar Elger, essay by Tim Griffin (Dresden: Schirmer/Mosel, 2012). On Lawler's adjusted-to-fit works, see Sven Lütticken, "Not Stone": Acting in and with Louise Lawler's Pictures," in *Louise Lawler: Adjusted* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2013).



Lawler. No Drones. 2011.
Installation view.

refugees and practically undefended when the British attacked on February 13, 1945.”¹⁷ Yet, he remarks, “even today there is no hint in any British museum of the systematic attacks on German civilians in their homes, no hint that these attacks constituted crimes under international humanitarian law for the protection of civilians.”¹⁸ Even, or perhaps especially, in the war museum, historical perspective is trumped by aerial perspective.

Lawler’s photograph of *Mustang Squadron* is entitled *No Drones*. Its angle is sidelong to the painting. Stretched out along the wall, it is anamorphically distorted, prodding the viewer’s body to shuttle sideways, as if in search of some elusive optical resolution. Adhering to the wall like a label, the vinyl surface of *No Drones* contrasts with its subject, a painting seen askance, pitched sharply forward, partially obscured, hooks and wire exposed. Not an image of an image of an image of bombing, then—an image suspended in the infinite regress of the virtual—*No Drones* presents instead a photographic mural of a photograph of an installation of

17. Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, trans. Linda Haverty Rugg (London: Granta, 2001), entry 214 (n.p.).

18. *Ibid.*, entry 200 (n.p.).

a painting of a photograph, itself photographically reproduced, of a squadron of bombers. And each of these translations performs a kind of estrangement, drawing the viewer into an intricate process of interpreting an aerial perspective. Unlike the viewpoint of the drone, whose operators search screens for targets to destroy, the perspective of *No Drones* is one of anamorphosis, in which mastery of the visual field, and by implication historical depth, is sufficiently frustrated that the very premise of such mastery is called into doubt.

In his seminar on anamorphosis, Jacques Lacan drew the attention of his listeners to a painting in the National Gallery in London, Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533), which offers a virtuoso demonstration of the principle that a picture is "a trap for the gaze."¹⁹ The young ambassadors, Jean de Dinteville and George de Selve, stand "frozen, stiffened in their showy adornments," he recounts, while between them, arrayed on two shelves, is "a series of objects that represent in the painting of the period the symbols of *vanitas*."²⁰ The upper shelf, where the figures' elbows rest, is the repository of astronomical devices, including a celestial globe, a portable sundial, and an astrolabe, instruments for measuring the heavens, the early equipment of a scientific dream of aerial mastery. The lower shelf

19. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 89.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 88.



Hans Holbein. *The Ambassadors*. 1533.

holds a terrestrial globe, a compass, an open hymn book, and a lute. The work's most enigmatic feature, however, hovers in the foreground, tilted on the diagonal, as if levitating. Lacan describes it as “the singular object . . . which is there to be looked at, in order to catch, I would almost say, to catch in its trap, the observer, that is to say, us.”²¹ Only by surrendering an overview of the painting and moving to its side does the viewer discern that the tilted object floating in the foreground is a skull. “It is,” Lacan continues,

an obvious way . . . of showing us that, as subjects, we are literally called into the picture, and represented here as caught. For the secret of this picture . . . is given at the moment when, moving slightly away, little by little, to the left, then turning around, we see what the magical floating figure signifies. It reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death's head.²²

A visitor to Lawler's exhibition in London, turning away from *Mustang Squadron/No Drones*, confronted—what else?—a photograph of Richter's *Skull* of 1983 pasted to the adjacent wall and retitled *Civilian*. In *The Ambassadors* of Holbein, the outsized skull hovers in the foreground of the painting, obscure to the viewer who examines the tableau head-on. This skull is, of course, a memento mori, a reminder of mortality that haunts the world of appearances, displayed here “in all its most fascinating forms,” as Lacan exclaims, in the double portrait.²³ For Lacan, its more particular effect, however, is to echo, or reflect, our nothingness, to annihilate us in the act of seeing. “All this shows,” he writes, “that at the very heart of the period in which the subject emerged and geometral optics was an

21. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 92.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 88.



Holbein. The Ambassadors (detail). 1533.



Lawler. *No Drones*. 2011.
Installation view.

object of research, Holbein makes visible for us here something that is simply the subject as annihilated.”²⁴ In Lawler’s staging of the anamorphic scenario, the subject-as-annihilated is, in effect, the civilian that could be me. In contrast to the drone’s eye view, which adopts the aerial perspective of the perpetrator, or plane, the anamorphic situation exploits an “inverted use of perspective” to reveal the illusion of this abstraction.²⁵

Coincident with the historical emergence of the mastering subject through perspective, Lacan speculated, came the emergence of “the gaze as such, in all its pulsatile, dazzling, and spread out function, as it is in this picture.”²⁶ In *No Drones*, the anamorphic picture and the skull are accompanied by a third element, a mirrored disco ball hung between them, low to the floor, reflecting the installation in its fish-eye gaze. At night, when the gallery was dark, the disco ball became the star of the show, a luminous silver globe spinning like a planet in a dazzling field of red and green flickers that was evocative both of festive holiday lights and of that other light show unfolding on computer screens in technological fantasies of aer-

24. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 88.

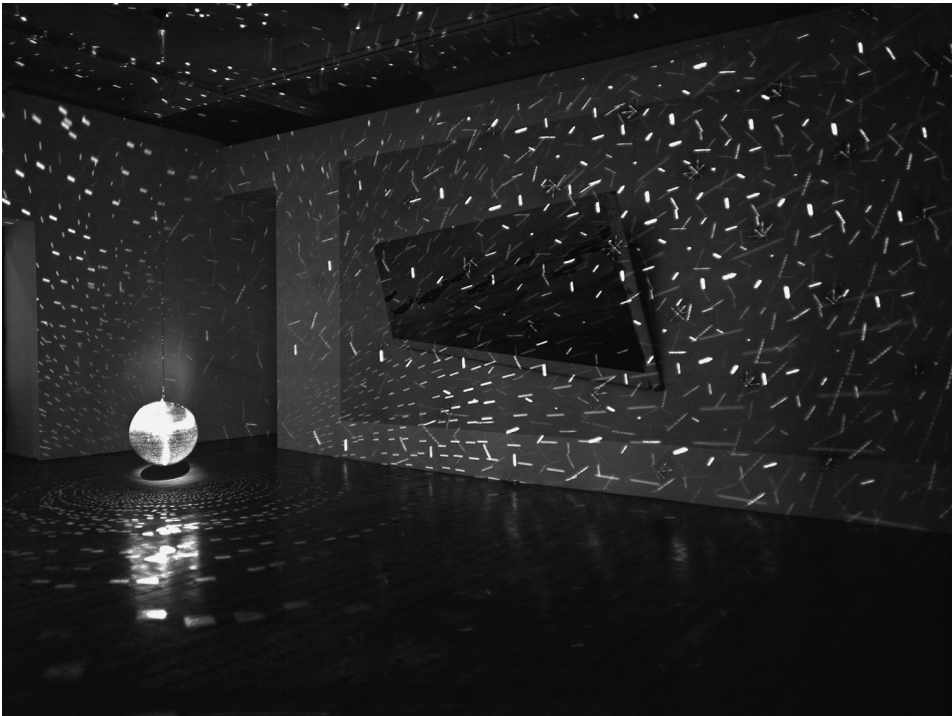
25. *Ibid.*, p. 87. Lawler was not explicitly referencing Holbein’s *Ambassadors*: “I was aware of [the] anamorphic skull, but wasn’t thinking of any particular work when installing” (e-mail communication with the author, October 17, 2012).

26. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

ial mastery and control. In another echo of *The Ambassadors*, with its ostentatious display of scientific instruments and globes—“everything that recalls, in the perspective of the period, the vanity of the arts and sciences”—Lawler drops this pulsating sphere at our feet, in the position occupied in Holbein’s painting by what Lacan calls the “magical floating object” that reflects our own nothingness, our lack.²⁷

Retitling Richter’s *Skull* as *Civilian*, Lawler alludes to the persistent omission from histories of aerial war of the death toll of noncombatants. Since the end of World War II, the perspective of war has been an insistently aerial one, an expansive overview that obscures suffering on the ground through the familiar euphemism “collateral damage.” Missing from these aerial fantasies of war is not only the civilian dead but the specter of our own annihilation, our own nothingness. Swept away with all those “No Nukes” banners that Lawler’s pale poster faintly reflects is the anxiety of annihilation, of nonexistence, to which Lacan’s theory of the gaze is dedicated. It is therefore not surprising that one casualty of our current wars has been psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity that dwell upon our lack.

27. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 92.



*Lawler. No Drones. 2011.
Installation view.*

In *No Drones*, Lawler echoes a question posed by Lacan: “How can we not see here, immanent in the geometral dimension . . . something symbolic of the function of the lack?”²⁸ In *The Ambassadors* of Holbein, the enigmatic object “from some angles appears to be flying through the air,” Lacan remarks, “at others to be tilted.”²⁹ It hangs in the air, eerily suspended, hideously flattened. The enigmatic object that is the skull, a reminder of our nothingness, exceeds the perspective of the image. It is only by abandoning the illusion of mastery over the visual field—which Lacan calls only “a partial dimension in the field of the gaze”—that we can make out the anamorphic effect and reflect upon its significance.³⁰

Anamorphosis exacts a looking askance that is at odds with the drone perspective of targets and precision strikes. Anamorphosis demands that we take our eye off the target. “Begin by walking out of the room,” Lacan advises. “It is then that, turning round as you leave . . . you apprehend in this form . . . What? A skull.”³¹ In her installation *No Drones*, Lawler conjures anamorphosis at every turn. Aerial fantasies assumed a heightened reality through the rhetoric of aerial photography, as commemorated in Richter’s *Mustang Squadron*. Taking a sidelong angle on the painting, Lawler exposes its illusion doubly, first in the re-presentation of Richter’s own appropriation of the motif, and then again in the oblique angle that evokes what Lacan calls “the gaze as such,” having, as he puts it, a “spread out function.”³² The “spread out function” of Lawler’s stretched photographs is in keeping with Lacan’s suggestion that our desire for mastery is potentially tripped up by the anamorphic image, which offers an illusion of mastery at the cost of that illusion’s being stretched beyond recognition. What destroys the illusion is the gaze, conceived by Lacan as outside us, a “pulsatile, dazzling, and spread out” effect, which Lawler slyly summarizes in the simultaneously refracting and reflecting effects of the mirror ball that is the fish-eye surrogate of Lacan’s famous sardine can glinting in the water.³³ It is only by turning one’s back on the picture, Lacan insisted, that the viewer discovers the secret of *The Ambassadors*, the secret of one’s own nothingness. In order to assume individual responsibility for war, Lawler implies, we might take a hint from Holbein and Lacan and look askance, turn our backs, and ignore the target completely.

In *No Drones*, Lawler produces an anamorphosis of political resistance to war, countering the drone perspective by inviting viewers to look askance, to contemplate our lack. “The anamorphic shift,” Slavoj Žižek has noted, “enables us to discern an apparently positive object as a ‘negative magnitude,’ as a mere ‘positivization of a void.’”³⁴ In *The Ambassadors*, the enigmatic object that is the skull exposes the vanities

28. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 88.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

34. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 76.

of cultural and scientific mastery represented by globe and astrolabe, and by painting itself. The illusion of perspective is revealed to be exactly that. It is only by sacrificing, however fleetingly, the fantasy of mastery over the visual field that we can discern the logic of anamorphosis—and put it to use. “Ideology,” Žižek maintains, “is the ‘self-evident’ surface structure whose function is to conceal the underlying ‘unbalanced,’ ‘uncanny’ structure.”³⁵ Lawler proposes the anamorphic shift as a logic that might enable us to glimpse the uncanny structure of drone culture.

4. No Nukes

The Italian psychoanalyst Franco Fornari, writing in the 1960s in response to the Cold War nuclear threat, argued in *The Psychoanalysis of War* that “the war phenomenon” is a cultural solution to a very real psychic and social problem, which is the need to expel terror from the inner world to the outer world, and to export destructiveness from our own social group.³⁶ Aerial bombing transformed war by enabling some of us to expel our destructiveness to the furthest corners of the Earth and so to distance ourselves from our own annihilative acts even while reveling in fantasies of omnipotence. But there was a catch. The increasing destructiveness of war that aerial bombing had unleashed, the psychoanalyst observed, threatened to deprive us of war itself.

“No Nukes,” in Fornari’s terms, poses a threat to our sanity. Nuclear war threatens to annihilate not only the enemy but ourselves as well. Faced with the prospect of planetary annihilation through war, Fornari predicted (correctly), we might be inclined to act out our desire for war through “transference wars.” In psychoanalytic parlance, transference signifies a distorted repetition of the past. We all engage in transference routinely, transposing past conflicts and attachments onto current situations, all the while imagining that what we do and feel today is fundamentally different from what we once did and felt. In *No Drones*, Lawler gestures toward this phenomenon of transference war, and toward the transference dimension of any war. Her anamorphic photograph of Richter’s painting of an aerial photograph of bombing in the iconic “good war” demonstrates the principle by which the flawed logic of aerial warfare can be stretched, or adjusted, to fit a myriad of contingencies, including those of protracted, even perpetual war. From an aerial point of view, Lawler suggests, a stretched-to-fit war provides a convincing-enough optical illusion. It tricks the eye. It is beneath the zoom of the hornet, as Woolf put it, in the shadow of the plane, that this illusion is undone.

Crazy is the title Lawler assigns to the mirror ball that hangs from the ceiling in the exhibition *No Drones*. In Fornari’s terms, war is a cultural bulwark against insanity. It converts the intolerable anxiety of our own aggression, experienced as an “internal terrifier,” into rational violence directed against an actual enemy. Whether found or

35. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 82.

36. Franco Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis of War*, trans. Alenka Pfeifer (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1974).

made, Fornari contends, the enemy that is the object of our destructiveness is also our deliverance, the guarantor of our sanity. The prospect of nuclear war, which threatened to render war obsolete, also left us potentially defenseless against our terrors, he maintains. MAD, the military doctrine of mutually assured destruction, was the aptly named solution to this predicament, providing, in the calculus of the Cold War, a logic by which preserving war also prevents its ultimate expression. To submit willingly to the psychic strain of living constantly on the brink of annihilation was mad, but also unsustainable, and our current wars provide, if not a resolution of the persistent nuclear threat, at least a distraction from it.

In her important book *Hiroshima After Iraq*, Rosalyn Deutsche argues that the Iraq War, purportedly instigated in response to an imminent nuclear threat, perpetuates the state of existence that the psychoanalyst Hanna Segal called “nuclear-mentality culture.”³⁷ After the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, other modes of terror bombing, Deutsche observes, were demoted to the term “conventional weapons,” making them appear “benign by contrast with their nuclear counterparts,” in a rhetorical gesture that enabled aerial destructiveness to intensify, even dramatically—for example, in Vietnam—in the guise of restraint.³⁸ *No Drones*, with its evocation of conventional bombing; *Crazy*, with its allusion to MAD; and *Civilian*, summoning the target of both, conspire to suggest that drone culture is not a solution to the problem of “nuclear-mentality culture” but a perpetuation of it.

We are engaged, as Fornari foretold, in a rearguard action to revive war, to reinvent it not as an actuality, with all the implications this might hold for our own destruction, but as a realistic-seeming fantasy, a skewed transference effect. Drone warfare is real, but its execution is virtual, condensing the nuclear threat of remote-controlled (self-)obliteration into a fantasy of mastery that is unilateral, targeted, and contained.

Crazy, the mirrored globe that dangles from the ceiling, its reflections playing dizzily over its faceted surface, encapsulates this fantasy as the precipitate of MAD and recalls an earlier body of work devoted to that theme. In 1966, the New York-based Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama blanketed the lawn of the Italian pavilion of the Venice Biennale with 1,500 plastic mirror balls, offering them for purchase under the slogan “Your Narcissism for Sale” to any passerby for the price of two dollars. She followed this up in the summer of 1967 with a psychedelic film, *Self-Obliteration*, and, in the summer of 1968, conducted a series of “anatomic explosions” in downtown New York, warning against the “pantoclastic prospect,” as Fornari called it, of a world pulverized into polka dots. She went on to produce infinity mirror rooms, kaleidoscopic chambers, and light shows designed to crystallize the hallucinatory condition

37. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Hiroshima After Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War* (New York: Columbia University, 2010), p. 25.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 24. On the intensification of aerial destructiveness in Vietnam to a level dwarfing the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, see Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Picador, 2013).

of contemporary nuclear politics in spectacles of infinite regress. For all this, Kusama herself was long dismissed as crazy.³⁹

The insistence on rationalism in the rhetoric of war is a constant, and responses to war that invoke its unconscious motives court derision. With *No Drones*, Lawler looks at this problem askance. Our current wars, she suggests, are anamorphic editions of the aerial fantasies of the recent past. Stretched-to-fit, she suggests, might be a more accurate description of the metaphorical atmosphere of our time of war than aimed-at-the-right-target. Extensive in space and time, our stretched-out, spread-out wars have become anamorphically distorted, politically and historically diffuse, she points out. As for critique, the target of Latour's challenge to the humanities, Lawler, too, seems skeptical. *No Drones* is pointed, but its angle is oblique.⁴⁰

39. On Kusama's art as a response to war, see Mignon Nixon, "Infinity Politics," in *Yayoi Kusama*, ed. Frances Morris (London: Tate, 2011), and "Anatomic Explosion on Wall Street," *October* 142 (Fall 2012), pp. 3–25.

40. In his recent essay "Louise Lawler: Memory Images of Art Under Spectacle," Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has declared her work's "most astonishing dimension" to be "the subtlety of its devastating and carefully annihilating antiaesthetic." *Louise Lawler, Adjusted* (Munich: Prestel, 2013), p. 85. Here, I have attempted to make a corresponding claim that Lawler employs a "carefully annihilating antiaesthetic" anamorphically, and apotropaically, as a response to the mystique of war.