

STATES OF THE CAUSE

Michèle Thériault

This text accompanies the exhibition In the vestibule with Forensic Architecture

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Curator: Michèle Thériault

Forensic Architecture (FA) operates at the intersection of human rights and international humanitarian law using as its primary material the great amount of digital data generated in urban areas of conflict resulting in visually rich and meticulously developed analyses of specific cases of human rights violation. These take the form of investigations—two of which are presented in the exhibition *In the vestibule with Forensic Architecture*—, which aim to provide new kinds of evidence for the prosecution of human rights violations. Architecture is used here as a mode of intervention and is defined broadly by FA’s chief investigator, Eyal Weizman “as a field of knowledge and as a mode of interpretation concerned not only with buildings but with an ever-changing set of relations between people and things, mediated by spaces and structures across multiple scales: from the human body to human-induced climate change ... and one that we gradually come to realize is becoming both a construction and a ruin.”ⁱ FA also produces files, which discursively examine notions of public truth and has developed a lexicon of key terms related to their practice of forensics. All of these initiatives are openly accessible on their website forensic-architecture.org. There, one will also find seminars and public lectures, articles and books by and on FA as well as the exhibitions in which their work has been featured over the years.

It is not accidental that FA qualifies itself as an agency. As the term suggests FA is about the power to act and nothing has been left to chance so that action is effective as possible: careful, minute and systematic processes that seek to achieve the highest level of accuracy and accountability. Similar characteristics define the mission and work of state bodies of policing and surveilling such as the FBI in the US or Canada's CSIS. Indeed, and although FA's practice is transparent and its research eagerly shared through its website and public manifestations, it also does not reveal certain elements of its investigations because of their sensitive nature. But the similarity is only procedural. FA is sitting on the other side of the one-way glass of the state and corporate apparatus, fully operational and responding to scrutiny with an equally uncompromising gaze enabled not by a multi-million dollars' budget and thousands of agents, but by carefully mining the pervasive use of tracking technologies and the sensitivity of their data and other available material. There is a political practice "committed to the possibilities of reversing the forensic gaze, to ways of turning forensics into a counter-hegemonic practice able to invert the relation between individuals and states, to challenge and resist state and corporate violence and the tyranny of their truth."ⁱⁱ Agency also more commonly means to function as a representative, to act on behalf of another or to provide a particular service and FA puts its resources at the service of those who prosecute human and nature rights violations, giving a presence to not only victims and those with a precarious, contested or undetermined status but also to areas in the world where sovereign control is disputed, undefined or suspended.

FA is a university-based research project of a critical nature established at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths College. Unlike the typical expertise of scientists and pathologists in conventional police forensics, the team at FA is a mix of architects, theorists, artists, designers, activists and scientists who are mostly graduates or students of the Centre or international external specialists. Eschewing the debatable neutrality of the figure of the scientist, researchers at FA take position: the agenda for research is set according to their political interests and cases are built up through collective work. Investigations range from the disputed results of the murder of a

reception desk worker in a café in Kassel; to the violence perpetrated against the natural and built environment in Guatemala between 1978 and 1984, to the architecture and conditions of detainment in Syria's Saydnaya prison. FA researchers use a wide array of evidence sometimes readily available, at times fragmentary, concealed, camouflaged or misinterpreted from satellite imagery, sensing technology data, photographs, CCTV footage, amateur videos, news and police reports and on the ground witness statements. This evidence is analyzed (or re-analyzed) visually and graphically, producing spatiotemporal models as well as auditory assessments supported by written commentary. What is specific to the work of FA is how they build up their cases with political advocacy in mind *and* concurrently use that body of knowledge to critique the field of forensics itself—the fraught and always negotiated relationship(s) between evidence, testimony, facts, public truth, state apparatus, the law and what constitutes the human. This critique takes shape and is sustained as it interfaces with forums (from the Roman *forensis*) the “gathering of political collectives”ⁱⁱⁱ—where not only the evidence and claims of their analyses are debated, tested and calibrated but their intellectual and political positions as well.

FA is a knowledge building practice and the questioning, critiquing and problematizing of its tactics, strategies and attending discourse, attested by their compilation of a nuanced lexicon of terms and the impressive body of written scholarship both on and by FA, have created a kind of epistemological model that functions equally as a dynamic arena for intellectual inquiry in the field of human rights. FA has made aesthetics a crucial element in the formulation, dissemination and reception of their work. It is understood as the sensorial nature of matter itself (how a building, for instance, registers and communicates structural damage, how bones can speak, how soil testifies to destruction) but more pervasively it “designates the techniques and technologies by which things are interpreted, presented and mediated in the forum” and “by which matter becomes a political agent”.^{iv} This particular conception of aesthetics is what FA is invited to exhibit in a contemporary art context and what Weizman believes distinguishes their work concerned with human rights from artworks that focus on the

representation or illustration (in however complex ways) of the plight of human rights victims.

Underlying FA's project is a constant exploration and testing of the meaning, construction and boundaries of truth and justice in relation to their public, state and legal definitions and practices in the context of a human rights culture—humanitarianism—whose terms have become absolute divides since 9/11: absolute evil on the one side and value of life, on the other. These terms find themselves in turn embedded in and impelled by the politics of the economic and financial imperatives of both liberal democracies and autocratic and non-state regimes resulting in a culture of human rights which can generate other forms of violence and relations of power, and whose beneficiaries are not necessarily the victims.^v Truth emerges as a fragile proposition out of the teasing out and careful study of material that Weizman qualifies as “weak signals, often at the threshold of visibility [and of audibility], pushing against the flood of obfuscating messages, of dominant narratives, fabricated noise and attempts at denial.”^{vi} For FA truth is constantly negotiated with manifestations of absence that can be both the result of obstruction by the dominant structures of power or of the limits of evidence, and the lacuna within it. In *Nakba Day Killings*, although weapon and sound analysis attesting to the use of lethal fire instead of rubber bullets ascertain the deliberate killing of two Palestinian boys by border police, it is not possible to absolutely identify the killer of one of the youths. Moreover, a charge of murder for the demonstrated killing of the other youth has not been brought by the military. In *The Left-to-Die Boat* case, all of the painstaking work examining and coordinating optical satellite imagery, ship signals and witness accounts of vessels approaching the drifting and distressed migrant boat, only to abandon it, has not led to a full and indisputable identification of the responsible parties involved, and the legal case brought against several countries who have stakes in the Mediterranean rescue and surveillance operations has not as yet succeeded (in both cases, other factors are, of course, involved). In these investigations, outcomes are still possible in the realm of justice but the lacunary dimension leaves the investigations open, the work of truth “a common

project under continuous construction,^{vii} characterized by renewed attempts at rendering visible and articulate. In the folds of what each investigation makes appear, what escapes and resists visibility, and the intricate political web within which it resides, is a relationship to the potentiality of truth—the latency of its agency—but whose reality nevertheless remains assailable and dismissible within the forums through which it moves.

The work of FA has been featured in an increasing number of contemporary art exhibitions. At times, it is particular collaborators identified as artists (notably, Weizman, Schuppli and Abu Hamdan) that have realized individual projects for exhibitions addressing evidence, human rights and forensic issues. But more recently, it is the investigatory work of FA realized collectively that is being featured. It is not unusual or even recent to present documentary work in exhibitions, there is a long history particularly in relation to photography whose status as an art form and the nature of its aesthetics and claims have been the subject of much debate.^{viii} A particularly marked manifestation of the ongoing divisiveness on the subject occurred during *documenta 11*, in 2002.^{ix} Conceived and organized by Okwui Enwezor and a team of curators, *documenta 11* was read by many art critics as excessively engaged with social reality through the documentary. Enwezor responded to this reductive assessment in an article that explored the meaning of the term documentary and its troubled relations to the representation of the real world, moralism, truth, and the opposition between the poetic and political, and the aesthetic and ethical. Dismissive of the notion of the documentary that is solely functionalist, on the other side of the deeper internal truth of art, Enwezor proposed a concept of the documentary that interfaces it with the concept of *vérité* or striving to be true to life in art referring to realism, naturalism, authenticity, and verisimilitude. In *documenta* biopolitics was articulated in the *vérité*/documentary space where the conditionalities of truth as a process of unraveling and exploring, a search for truth (*vérité*) are confronted to a forensic inclination in the recording of dry facts (the documentary mode). In such an encounter the viewer can relate to something that is not

only a fact in the real world but also true in the social condition of that world in its larger complexity.^x

The strategies and practices of FA do indeed record facts and frame them with the greatest precision through the analysis they are subjected to, but they are everything but 'dry' because of their embeddedness in the political terrain in which they are located and the difficulty to bring them to the surface. The fragile nature of their status and their conditionality communicate the complicated relationship between fact and truth. This complication brings the viewer/reader of FA's investigations into the larger arena of the social and political relations of power, a highly unstable field. Moreover, affect plays an important role in their particular construction of the documentary, for as Weizman underlines, the desire to transform the way things are is at the heart of their project and this drive for change is not only achieved by exploiting material sensitivity but by a sensitivity to the materiality of politics and the ability to feel pain.^{xi}

That FA's work finds a platform in those places that program contemporary art exhibitions is fitting. At least in those like the Ellen Art Gallery that consider inquiry to be at the heart of their approach. As such, these places are particularly responsive to addressing new forms and modes of visibility and their relationship to textuality, redefined approaches to materiality and the processes that attend a practice such as FA's. Furthermore, a critical approach to the exhibitionary reflects on how practice intersects with display, discourse and spatiality in relation to how it has been constituted by the conditions of the contemporary world. FA represents a novel and incisive practice that is itself a forum for art institutions to question the limits of aesthetics, the documentary and intent, and the role politics in art can play in society.

All of FA's investigations could have been featured in this exhibition. We chose *The Left-to-Die Boat*, because of the overwhelming question of migrancy that permeates the world today, and how it is profoundly inflecting definitions of citizenship, statehood and sovereignty, indeed the human. *The Left-to-Die Boat* also radically recasts the sea

and vast expanses of water as significant political zones that can deny the loss of life any traceability, thereby raising the question of an ethics of value. As for *Nakba Day Killings*, an expedient killing of two youths, it underlines how limited evidence can be readdressed and reframed through the nuanced technology of sound analysis, to signify an entirely different discourse of truth that clouds the transparency of the original event.

Given that the full extent of FAs investigations is available on their website, an exhibitionary presentation gives them an accentuated display, as is the case here. The summarizing video is singled out on a flat screen whereas the full analysis is made available on computer stations. In this way, the viewer gains a distance giving him or her the possibility to subject this practice to the same examinatory gaze that is theirs within the parameters of a distinct spatiality.

NOTES

ⁱ Eyal Weizman, "Introduction: Forensis," in *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, ed. Forensic

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 9.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 15.

^v On this question see Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso, 2011); and Robert Meister *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Literature abounds on the subject of the instrumentalization of human rights and the complex and entangled relationships between NGOs, state governments and the military. See *Nongovernmental Politics*, ed. Michel Feher with Gaëlle Krikorian and Yates McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

^{vi} Weizman, "Introduction: Forensis," 29.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 29.

^{viii} See Olivier Lugon, "Documentary: Authority and Ambiguity," in *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art #1*, ed. Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (Annandale-on-Hudson and Berlin: Centre for Curatorial Studies, Bard College and Sternberg Press, 2008), 28-37; *Le style documentaire, D'August Sander à Walker Evans. 1920-1945* (Paris, Macula, 2001 / 2011).

^{ix} Okwui Enwezor, “Documentary/Vérité : Bio-Politic, Human Rights and the Figure of ‘Truth’ in Contemporary Art,” in *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art #1*, ed. Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (Annandale-on-Hudson and Berlin: Centre for Curatorial Studies, Bard College and Sternberg Press, 2008), 63-102.

^x *Ibid.*, 97.

^{xi} Weizman, “Introduction: Forensis,” 30.