

Museums as Social Spaces

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Forensic Architecture (FA), the research collective of which I am a member, was born around 2011 at the Visual Cultures department of Goldsmiths, University of London, as a research project within the 'Centre for Research Architecture' (CRA); this is a practice-led, postgraduate faculty founded by FA's director, Eyal Weizman. Since that time, FA has grown up in an era defined politically by the collapse of old structures, and technologically by the rapid and overwhelming victory of new forms of communication that have bred new forms of attention, discourse, and deception in turn.

Across that same span of time, the CRA has given birth to a field which has thus far spawned two Turner Prize nominees and a Turner Prize winner, while simultaneously impacting legal filings at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), thereby contributing to the post-conflict truth commissions in Guatemala and Colombia; it has also witnessed the output of its practices presented to the UN General Assembly.

Today, FA comprises a team of around twenty full-time staff, raised up by a dense orbit of collaborators, alumni, fellows, friends, allies, and partners from within Goldsmiths and is supported by funding from the European Research Council (ERC), Europe's highest academic funding body. Our mission is two-fold: first, to intervene in ongoing political struggles surrounding environmental and human rights violations by state actors and institutions and to challenge their misuse of authority by developing robust evidentiary case files on behalf of civil society. Second, through that work, we seek to propose new methodologies and techniques for contemporary investigative practices and to experiment with new strategies for both the development and deployment of research findings.

That two-fold mission is a response to a confluence of contemporary social, political, and technological conditions. The growth into ubiquity of smartphones and social media have caused previous systems of information dissemina-

tion – those defined by the ‘legacy media’ establishment and characterized by limited sources of information and comparably ‘slow’ news – to implode. In their place, we find a dizzyingly multi-polar, peer-to-peer marketplace of data has grown haphazardly, its qualities and impacts on our shared construction of agreed facts were entirely unpredicted and emergent. This new and radically horizontal information-dissemination ecosystem has inspired new kinds of authoritarian state logics that weaponize doubt in order to deflect from their actions, thereby questioning the nature, and even the possibility, of shared truths: it is behind this very uncertainty that the 21st century’s rights violations are obscured.

In that context, FA explores responses to the following question: what are the tools available to civil society to push back against state violence, against human rights violations, environmental degradation, displacement, land dispossession, police murder, and others?

FA tries to push in many directions at once in order to explore new answers to the aforementioned question. This could concern new fields of technology, in the use of artificial intelligence techniques to train computer vision classifiers to find Russian tanks in eastern Ukraine during the 2014 invasion, for example.¹ It could concern applications of law, in our partnerships with the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights for example, who have been among the pioneers of legal mechanisms for rights violations in industrial supply chains.² However, art spaces are among the most productive domains in which we have explored answers to that question.

In 2020, we opened a new office in Berlin, home to a new agency that is independent, but which remains closely linked to FA (for now, as it grows into maturity). Its name is *Forensis*. ‘Forensis’ is the Latin root of the word ‘forensics’, but originally referred to the Roman forum, a place of public discussion, argument, and rhetoric in which ideas would be fought for and audiences won over. This understanding is foundational to both FA’s practice and to the agency’s relation to art spaces as spaces of argument and truth-production – places

1 <https://ilovaish.forensic-architecture.org/> (08/01/2023).

2 <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-ali-enterprises-factory-fire> (08/01/2023).

in which publics may be ‘sparked into being’ around contemporary social and political issues.³

The word *forensics* has taken a journey since that time toward its present, popular application as, essentially, the deployment of science in the domain of law. Part of our work, thus, is an attempt to propose a return to an earlier conception of ‘forensics’, not least as a political practice, but as a practice available to civil society. State forensics should already be understood as a political practice because of the manner in which it was corralled and deployed in the service of the courts – as an art which ensures, in needful circumstances, the supremacy of the state’s position and narrative, and doing so by utilizing the state’s supremacy of information and access: its ability to erect cordons, to exclude the public (and the public’s gaze) from certain spaces; its resource advantages; and its ability to set courtrooms’ rules, and to define the processes of justice.⁴

Our ambition to ‘socialise’ the production of evidence finds a natural home in art spaces – that is, to involve as many participants as possible in the development and presentation of findings – in spaces which encourage flexibility and a variety of approaches and which nurture a receptive audience. However, we are still learning exactly how to use such spaces to speak outwards and back into political and legal processes. I hope to offer an insight into recent ways in which FA have attempted to activate cultural spaces in the pursuit of accountability for rights violations by discussing three of FA’s cases, from 2019 to the present.

TRIPLE-CHASER

A storm was already brewing by the time the agency was invited to exhibit at the 2019 Whitney Biennial. Connections were established between the then-vice chair of the Whitney’s board of trustees, Warren B. Kanderson, and the shocking use of tear gas against civilians at the San Diego-Tijuana border. Images circulated that revealed the manufacturer’s name: SAFARILAND. The controversy that followed was only the latest, albeit particularly egregious, demons-

3 Noortje Marres: Issues Spark a Public into Being: A Key but Often Forgotten Point of the Lippmann-Dewey Debate, in: Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.): *Making Things Public*, p. 217.

4 It is in opposition to this process that our director, Eyal Weizman, describes our ‘counter-forensic’ work, after Marx, as ‘seizing the means of evidence production’.

tration of the interconnections between colonial capitalism, border regimes, and our centers of culture.

In the months leading up to the Biennial's opening, an activist group known as WAGE had called on artists to withhold their work from the Biennial, in part over the institution's relationship with Kanders, but also over the economic relationship between the Whitney and the exhibiting artists – the 2019 biennial was also notable because it was the first time exhibiting artists were paid for their contributions as a result of their actions.

A remarkable direct-action campaign was organized by the 'Decolonize This Place' activist network worked alongside WAGE's campaign. This campaign took over parts of the Whitney's public spaces, holding demonstrations and public lectures addressing topics from tear gas to indigenous land dispossession. These actions were constantly innovative, uncompromising, and grassroots, and the depth of our learning from those actions was testament to both the bi-directional nature of FA's engagement with artistic spaces, as well as to the rich possibilities that the gallery's multi-polar space offered.

Our research contribution was the film *TRIPLE-CHASER*, a collaboration with the filmmaker Laura Poitras' Praxis Films.⁵ *TRIPLE-CHASER* told the story of our efforts to build an algorithmic 'computer vision' system for identifying tear gas grenades in open source media – beginning with Safariland's flagship grenade, after which the film was named – as well as our efforts to investigate Kanders' other companies, including the manufacturers of a sniper bullet apparently favored by the Israeli army. As weeks ticked by towards the Biennial's opening, FA contributed additional research to support the actions of 'Decolonize' and their partners by identifying the use of Safariland tear gas in Puerto Rico, for example. The territory was at that time in uprising over ongoing economic impositions by the US and was a subject of Decolonize's 'nine weeks of art and action'.⁶ Later, on the day of the Biennial's opening black-tie gala at, at which Warren Kanders was in attendance, we published the text of our investigation into Sierra Bullets, another company connected to Kanders, laying out our findings that connected the company to the egregious and illegal violence that was perpetrated in Gaza in 2018.⁷ One month later, in July 2019, three former Biennial exhibitors wrote an open letter that named the exhibition as the

5 <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/triple-chaser> (08/01/2023).

6 <https://decolonizethisplace.org/9weeksofartinaction2> (08/01/2023).

7 <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/matchking-warren-b-kanders-and-the-israel-defense-forces> (08/01/2023).

“Tear Gas Biennial”, and called for exhibitors to withdraw their work from the show.⁸ We were one of nine exhibitors who followed that call, and within days of that threatened withdrawal, we received the news that we had been fighting for: Warren Kanders had resigned his position on the board.

The effort that ultimately contributed to Kanders’ resignation from the Whitney Museum’s board richly evidenced FA’s ‘ecosystemic’ model of investigation. The process of fact-finding, and fact-making, which began with the open source research of students at the CRA, eventually brought activists and citizens from four continents, software developers, academics, animators, open source investigators, and filmmakers, as well as NGOs and solidarity movements, into a distributed constellation of action that resulted in this investigation. The last part of that assemblage, of course, was the Whitney itself, at the same time venue, agent, and subject. These diverse actors’ shared efforts both established and disseminated a set of mutually supporting truth claims, thereby building agency across fields and disciplines to confront the entanglement of extractive capital and colonial violence with culture. TRIPLE-CHASER was later named by the New York Times as being among the leading examples of post-war protest art.⁹

Kanders – who had profited from the manufacture and sale of munitions used, according to our research, against civilians in at least a dozen countries for years – was untouchable either legally or politically. However, the movement to which TRIPLE-CHASER had contributed successfully demonstrated that there are indeed ways to ‘punch up’ against those who profit from entrenched, violent capitalist structures. The skilful application of pressure through the domain of the arts, thereby breaking the tacit contract between venue and artist – do not follow the money – can be one such path. Echoes of the same potential were seen in Yana Peel’s 2019 resignation from the board of London’s Serpentine Gallery after her financial links to Israeli cybersurveillance firm NSO Group were exposed, thereby causing Hito Steyerl to swiftly withdraw a digital work from the Serpentine’s web pages. Such examples – along with other controversies, including over our 2021 exhibition at Manchester’s

8 <https://www.artforum.com/slant/a-statement-from-hannah-black-ciaran-finlayson-and-tobi-haslett-on-warren-kanders-and-the-2019-whitney-biennial-80328> (08/01/2023).

9 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/15/t-magazine/most-influential-protest-art.html> (08/01/2023).

Whitworth gallery¹⁰ – return to and revitalize the legacy of institutional critique. Far from being itself ‘institutionalized’, what FA asks of institutions and of their staff is a position concerning external realities of oppression, dispossession, and the violation of rights – that which, contrary to Fraser, do indeed exist “‘outside” of the institution’ with ‘fixed, substantive characteristics’.¹¹ FA invites those realities to enter the gallery with it, providing foundational context for what is exhibited there (such as the chapters of our work *Cloud Studies* that refer to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories in the case of the Whitworth), and demanding that the work, and the institution itself, both respond to and engage with the pursuit of broader political or social goals.

Racist Terror Attack in Hanau

Beyond institutional critique, FA offers an opportunity for (temporary) institutional *transformation* to contemporary art institutions. In June 2022, we published our second investigation into the February 2020 neo-Nazi terror attack in the small town of Hanau, near Frankfurt, in time to launch our exhibition *Three Doors* at the Frankfurter Kunstverein. Our work on the Hanau case concerned two of the three eponymous doors: one, an emergency exit, allegedly locked at the behest of local authorities, thereby preventing a group of young men from escaping when a racist murderer entered their bar; the other, the front door of the murderer’s house, which police failed to break down for more than four hours, after surrounding him in his home.¹² The exhibition, which traveled from Frankfurt to Berlin, and then to Hanau in 2023, presented doors as social contracts that define what is public and private, state and civilian. In the case of Hanau, each door stands for a breakdown of the state’s responsibility to its marginalized and racialized citizens.

10 <https://artreview.com/forensic-architecture-palestinian-solidarity-furore-whitworth-solution/> (08/01/2023).

11 Andrea Fraser: From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique, *Artforum*, September 2005, XLIV, No. 1, pp. 278–283.

12 The third door was that of the police cell in Dessau, in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt, in which Oury Jalloh, an asylum seeker from Sierra Leone, was found burned to death in January 2005 – the only feasible explanations for which include the involvement of the officers who had detained him. For the purposes of this essay, I will primarily discuss our work on the Hanau case.

Our work on the case began in September 2021, at the invitation of 'Initiative 19. Februar' Hanau, an activist collective that had grown up around the families of the victims, the survivors, and of lawyers acting for some of those families. 'Initiative 19. Februar' had grown up nourished by the experiences of similar organizations; co-curation of *Three Doors* was also shared with the Initiative in Memory of Oury Jalloh, while 'Initiative 6. April' had previously commissioned FA to investigate the 2006 neo-Nazi murder of Halit Yozgat in Kassel, just a stone's throw from Hanau, at which an agent of the state secret service, the Hessischer Verfassungsschutz, had been present.

It was in the context of that collaboration with 'Initiative 6. April' that FA first stood with one foot in the art gallery and one foot in a parliamentary inquiry, with the interesting result that politicians attempted to exclude our findings for being 'art, not evidence', while critics simultaneously called our exhibition of the same findings at *Documenta14* 'evidence, not art'.

While the necessity for such initiatives is a sad product of entrenched racism in Germany, their modes of operation – decentralized, situated, savvy, and sensitive – are inspiring examples of an investigative-activist nexus, from which our own practice has learned much.

As we worked, the families and the Initiative watched as their opportunities for accountability through the courts fell away; in all, four legal processes were begun and were discontinued. A parliamentary inquiry is ongoing, but its effectiveness is hamstrung by both factional infighting and blame-shifting.

An opportunity came at that inquiry's first public hearings, however. Survivors presented our preliminary findings into the locked emergency exit, thereby disputing the public prosecutor's grounds for closing their own investigation. By the end of that hearing, it was in-principle agreed that we would present our findings in full later on in the process, an immediate example of our work's disruptive capacity in the hands of those with the 'situated knowledge' of racist violence.

As the inquiry limped towards its summer break, *Three Doors* seized control of the narrative by becoming a 'people's inquiry'. At the show's opening, hundreds of people gathered in the alleys around the Kunstverein in order to hear the demands of the families, a contemporary incarnation of the *forum* on which our understanding of forensics is based. Niculescu Păun, whose son Vili-Viorel, was murdered while trying to intervene to stop the attack, told assembled journalists: "the truth is here, in this room." For three months, the first floor of the Kunstverein bristled with activist energy, as both survivors of the attack

and the families of the victims led guided tours, hosted press conferences, and interrogated local politicians.

The Killing of Mark Duggan

What occurred at *Three Doors* was not exactly Reilly's 'curatorial activism',¹³ but was more a kind of 'activist curation' that, for FA, had its roots in an earlier exhibition, which also spoke to police failure, and cover-ups rooted in racist structures. That exhibition, *War Inna Babylon*, at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), was indeed, as Reilly proposes, 'proactively antithetical' to the expected content of cultural institutions and certainly 'misbehaved' in order to better act as a platform for marginalized experience.

We premiered our work on the police shooting of Mark Duggan in Tottenham, north London at that show, in the late summer of 2021. However, it was not an FA exhibition; rather, it was curated by the anti-racist activist group Tottenham Rights,¹⁴ with Kamara Scott and Rhianna Jade Parker. Mark Duggan, a Black man, was killed by armed police on 4 August 2011, when the minicab he was travelling in was followed, and then dramatically stopped, by armed officers from London's Metropolitan Police. Duggan was known to the police, and at the time of the stop was in possession of a shoebox, inside of which was a firearm.

The unresolved circumstances of his death, and the behavior of the 'Met' in the following hours and days precipitated the most widespread civil unrest witnessed in the UK in a generation. In the years that followed, the Duggan family and their supporters – Tottenham Rights foremost among them – saw the state close ranks around the officers involved. An inquiry by the police watchdog concluded that the officer had no case to answer, while a coroner's inquest reached a (somewhat infamous) verdict of 'lawful killing' – even as it also concluded that Mark Duggan was unarmed at the moment that he was shot.

At the heart of the case was the testimony of a firearms officer known only as V53, who fired the two fatal shots. V53 claimed to have seen a gun in Mark's hand as he exited the minicab and turned towards the officers converging on his position. While a gun was later found on the scene, it was found meters

13 Maura Reilly: Curatorial Activism.

14 More about Tottenham Rights can be found at <http://www.tottenhamrights.org> (08/01/2023).

away from where Mark was shot, without any trace of his DNA. However, a police officer's word in such cases is, in the eyes of UK law, a kind of evidentiary bedrock that is broadly immune to challenge. In such moments, an officer's vision has the uncommon power to generate reality.

Thus, the apparent contradiction between V53's twin claims: first, that his eyes were fixed firmly on the gun in Duggan's hand, and second that he nevertheless did not see the throwing motion that would have been required to hurl the gun to the position in which it was found, was considered 'surprising' by the police watchdog, but was not worthy of further examination.

The case, thus, hinged on V53's embodied experience. Demonstrating the improbable nature of V53's testimony on paper, using plans and measured distances, could only get us so far – the police watchdog ultimately declined our request to reinvestigate the case, based on our work. At the ICA, we resolved to present our findings in a virtual reality environment, thereby allowing an audience to step into an immersive, dynamic, and digital reconstruction of the shooting, watching from behind the eyes of multiple officers.

The work took Londoners individually, one-by-one, into the heart of the 'split second' of Mark Duggan's death, an indivisible, flexible space of exception in which any action by a state agent was pre-emptively justified by his own questionable perceptual account.¹⁵ Accompanying the digital environment at the heart of the work were murals, plans, and diagrams that broke down our investigative methodology. Meanwhile, the exhibition that surrounded our work was a vivid and uncompromising history lesson that drew on archival materials in order to tell a story of the reality of Black British experience from the 1950s to the present, of racism and police violence, culminating in the vicious and deeply flawed 'Gangs Matrix', a racist surveillance program devised by a vengeful British state in the wake of the very unrest that followed Mark Duggan's death.

Together, the exhibition constituted an archetype of the 'long duration of the split second', an organizing concept for FA's practice: the 'split second' becomes a window through which to view the pervasive hinterland of prejudices, of structural conditions of racism and the inequality – the 'long duration' – which run like threads through moments of eruptive violence, like that which ended Mark Duggan's life. The ICA itself was a symbolically powerful location for such

15 Our director, Eyal Weizman, has extensively articulated the significance of the split second in this 2019 lecture at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal: [https://macm.org/en/activities/lecture-by-eyal-weizman/\(08/01/2023\)](https://macm.org/en/activities/lecture-by-eyal-weizman/(08/01/2023)).

an exhibition, just a stone's throw from the seat of the British monarchy, whose household cavalry paraded past the exhibition's door every morning. Across the road sits the National Police Memorial, and beyond that, Whitehall, the sprawling heart of the British civil service – the heart of *Babylon*.¹⁶

I hope that I have provided a broad sketch of some of the landscape of possibility for the interweaving of activist energy, aesthetic-investigative capacity, and cultural forums through these examples. Such examples are by no means historical, but instead continue to guide our practice into new areas and into new engagements: the father-daughter team at the heart of Tottenham Rights, Stafford and Kamara Scott, are guest professors with us for the 2022–23 academic year, while the interaction of inquiry and gallery has continued in Hessen, with FA having been invited to present in the committee rooms of the Hessen parliament for a second time in late 2022, even while *Three Doors* shows at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, next door to Germany's federal parliament.



16 This was defined in the exhibition as 'systemic power and Western cultures seen as degenerate or oppressive, especially the police'.





Figures

- 1) War Inna Babylon. Forensic Architecture's investigation into the 2011 police shooting of Mark Duggan became part of the exhibition "War Inna Babylon" at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts and which contextualised the killing into decades of structural racism in both British state institutions and society more generally. Credit: Marc Blower/ICA.
- 2) Three Doors. Forensic Architecture presented new evidence to the public – and to local politicians – concerning the 2020 racist terror attack in nearby Hanau at the 2022 exhibition "Three Doors" at the Frankfurter Kunstverein. This lead directly to the agency's invitation to participate in the ongoing state parliamentary inquiry in the state of Hessen. Credit: Norbert Miguletz/Frankfurter Kunstverein.
- 3) Triple-Chaser. Forensic Architecture trained a 'computer vision' algorithm to search online for evidence of the use of tear gas grenades manufactured by SAFARILAND, a company owned by then-vice-chair of the Whitney's board of trustees in response to their invitation to the 2019 Biennial at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. Credit: Forensic Architecture/Praxis Films.
- 4) Hiran. Forensic Architecture's research uses digital models and open-source data (a video clip recorded from a police helicopter and published to Twitter) to challenge claims made by state agencies concerning violence committed against civilians by police, military, or security forces. Credit: Forensic Architecture.