

# Dying to Speak: Forensic Spatiality

*Eyal Weizman was appointed the founding director of research architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2005. He coined this term to conflate research and architecture and to propose critical research as architecture and architecture as knowledge production, both of which can lead to interventions in the spatial environment that he calls “the political plastic.” He went on to found, together with Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal, the Decolonizing Architecture Institute near Bethlehem, on the West Bank, in 2007, and is currently pursuing a body of research called “forensic architecture,” which will result in his new book Dying to Speak. Weizman’s groundbreaking work on the expanded territorialization of Israel’s architecture of occupation was published in 2007 as Hollow Land.*

*TINA DI CARLO: In your forthcoming book Dying to Speak you theorize forensic spatiality, which stems from your long-standing interest in international law. Can forensic evidence as an object, say a destroyed building, a document, or a dead body – and here I am playing on the double entendre of the dead body and the dead object typically ascribed to the curatorial practice of collecting – actually speak? Or is mediation necessary?*

**EYAL WEIZMAN:** I am interested in forensics because it embodies a shift from the speech of humans to the communicative capacity and “agency” of things. Several legal and cultural scholars have labelled the third part of the 20th century, with its attention to testimonies, truth commissions, and interviews, as “the era of the witness.” It seems to me that in the field of international law, but also in general political culture, we might have entered a stage when we have become more attuned to the communicative capacity of things, of things speaking, if you like, between themselves and to us. This material approach is simultaneously evident in a number of areas and disciplines. Today’s legal and political decisions are based upon the capacity to read and present DNA samples, 3D scans, nanotechnology, and the “enhanced vision” of electromagnetic microscopes and satellite surveillance, which extends from the topography of the seabed to the remnants of destroyed or bombed out buildings. This is

not just science, but its associated rhetoric. Just as the “era of the witness” had its aesthetics – testimony still occupies a central place in contemporary culture and art galleries – and its ethics of compassion, the forensic shift might bring about its own associated ethics and aesthetics. If popular entertainment is at all an indicator of cultural shifts, then it is interesting to note how today the forensic-detective has gradually replaced the physiologist-detective in TV dramas. Today’s narratives are told through things.

In relation to this idea of speech, the origins of the term *forensics* might be revealing. The word derives from the Latin *forensis*, which means “forum” and refers to the practice of making an argument by using objects before a gathering such as a professional, political, or legal forum. Forensics was part of rhetoric. Rhetoric, of course, is about speech, but forensics does not refer to the speech of humans but to that of *objects* or *things*. In forensic rhetoric, objects address the forum. Things need, however, a “translator” to interpret and mediate their speech. Because the thing speaks through, or is “ventriloquized” by, its translator, the object and its translator make a necessary and interdependent duo. To refute a legal/rhetorical statement, it is enough to refute one of the two: to either show that the object is inauthentic or that its interpreter is biased.

TDC: *Have you been literally experimenting with the inscription of the visible in the process of writing Dying to Speak?*

EW: Yes. As Oscar Wilde once said, “The true mystery of the world is in the visible, not the invisible.” In relation to my book on forensics I have been experimenting with genres of writing beyond the spatial-documentary form of my earlier work and its hard sense of gathering/organizing/analyzing. The genre of this book is closer to critical biography. But it’s the critical biography of structures and objects. It is similar to the method of my favorite forensic anthropologist, Clyde Snow, who pioneered the forensic presentation of mass graves and also investigated the skulls of people, from Tutankhamun to Josef Mengele to JFK. Snow liked to refer to his work as “osteo-biography.” He said, “There is a brief but very useful and informative biography of an individual contained within the skeleton, if you know how to read it.” He used one of the most important principals of forensic presentation, which the Romans called *prosopopea*. In classic rhetoric *prosopopea* referred to speech on behalf of things. This principal is employed, as Thomas Keenan showed, when bones are presented as “witnesses” in court.

TDC: *In the way you theorize forensics, the forum begins to be an operative space. Would an analogous idea of the forum in art discourses be one way to reinstate the public, as opposed to the audience?*

EW: Maybe, yes. The principle of forensics assumes two interrelated sets of spatial relations and both are relations between publics and things. The first is a relation between an event and the object in which it is registered. The second is a relation between the object and the construction or the assembly of the forum to which it is addressed, or within which it resonates. The forums to which contemporary forensics are addressed are not only the actual spaces of the court or parliaments; they are also diffused and networked, created through and by the media, and operate across a multiplicity of international institutions. Forensics is thus as concerned with the materialization of the event as with the construction of a forum and the performance of the object within it. So forensics is not only the writing of history; its other part is the constant construction of its forums – and here lies its propositional potential.

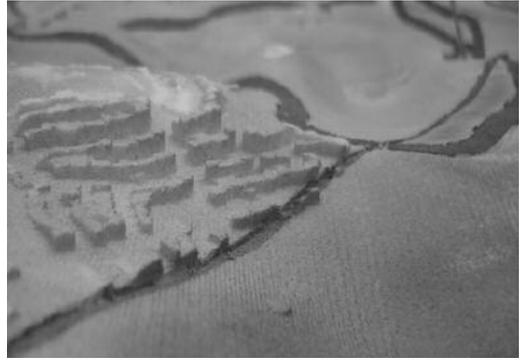
TDC: *What do you see as the difference between the documentary and the evidentiary? You mentioned Tom Keenan, which made me think of his “Mobilizing of Shame,” where he queries and critiques the assumption that revealing produces knowledge, and knowledge coupled with reason is seen as productive – i.e., together, and within a public forum, they can shame one into acting. Does evidence go beyond merely revealing to inscribe a certain agency in things?*

EW: Yes. His challenge becomes more relevant as we move from situations where formative political powers operate in relative obscurity – thus calling for activists to engage on the level of “exposure” – to a form of politics that seems to operate in full view, camouflaged only by being buried within the all-too-dense field of media oversaturation. Commenting on Stalin, Žižek once remarked that the best place to hide a body is in a pile of corpses. We can no longer take for granted that our emphasis on the mobilization of aural or visual testimonies – the work of exposure – whether of people or of things, will have a transformative effect in and by itself, in the sense that new knowledge will be transferred into a form of political action. In this respect we must be more attuned to forms of actual propositional intervention that mobilize material research. So the question is whether forensics could become propositional and projective.

We can come back to this later, but first I want to respond to your point about the documentary. Traditionally the documentary form is associated with photography, film, video, and their archives. New technology now enables new types of documenting techniques and documentary products to emerge. For example, in archaeology, building conservation, and forensics, we more and more frequently see remote sensing devices like three-dimensional laser scanners taking not a photograph but sampling an entire scene – a car accident, say, with people, machines, and structures. When digitally printed in three dimensions, the product might reopen the same questions of copyright that arose with the invention of photography. The product, however, would become a previously unknown form of object-making that could be called – for lack of a better word – “documentary sculpture.” That is, a disposition of bodies and structures in space that is not a representation but a documentation.

TDC: *This brings me back to your earlier work and some very tangible examples – the kind of intense interaction between “things” and people in a dense political context and within the context of international law. Could your practice inform – though in perhaps a more benign way – a curatorial practice that is both a documentary and propositional device, in and outside the gallery? How has the complex interaction between people, things, and building manifested itself in your earlier work? For example, in the wall trials or in the decolonizing architecture project, where the model becomes a productive thing, rather than a representational object?*

EW: I am interested in the performance of the thing when presented forensically, and this might connect the “choreography” of international law to that of the gallery and your curatorial investigation, at least potentially. I am interested in the analytical frame of international law, or war crimes, not because I find in it a redemptive political agency – we have too often seen its abuse and impotence – but because war crime investigations usually call for an analysis of a complex event produced by an assemblage of multiple political and military actors – a distributed agency that bears on the organization of space. Architecture and its representations – either as remote sensing models, satellite imagery, and event 3D animations and physical models – enter ever more frequently as evidence in the courts of international law. I consider this field a kind of laboratory for questioning an intense and rapid relation between politics, the



COURTROOM DRAWING OF THE ISRAEL HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE EXAMINING A MODEL (RIGHT) OF THE BOUNDARIES AND PATH OF THE WALL IN THE WEST BANK. DRAWING: CHRISTINE CORNELL, 2008. IMAGES COURTESY EYAL WEIZMAN.

built environment, and forms of knowledge. Together with Situ Studio in New York, the Centre for Research Architecture [CRA] has already presented crucial forensics in several cases.

The specific cases you mentioned were the trials in the Israeli courts that dealt with the wall in the West Bank. I was interested in these trials because they were not trials of people but rather of a thing. They were held not to determine guilt and punishment but to configure and regulate the properties of a structure or an apparatus. It was the “behavior” of the wall, the “elastic line” of its path, which was being pushed and pulled by all parties, that was being adjudicated. When a model of the wall was first called into court – it was the first model of the wall to be produced and the first time that an architectural model was called into court – the judges, who were sitting too high to see it, had to step down from their bench to approach it, calling the lawyers from both parties to join them. Even some people of the audience approached to hear better. People like models. So this part of the trial was conducted around the model. It was a disruption because the physical presence of the model disturbed the usual spatial structure and legal “protocol” of the courtroom. It was an unordered legal process. It was the “object quality” of the model – not its representation – and its function as evidence that changed the choreography of the legal process. Through the structure of the legal argument, the model became implicated in the design process, and through the model the law was mobilized in material action. For me, this suggested that a certain “forensic engineering” came into play – the final path of the wall was actually designed in court. In this sense I am interested in the model as a sort of legal prosthesis that allowed for things to be reorganized. In Bethlehem we also work with these ideas – and the use of architecture – in order to generate situations and political processes.

TDC: *How have you translated these kinds of readings and relations into a practice?*

EW: In *Log 6* I published an essay about the evacuation of the settlements in Gaza in 2005. I was then part of a team working for the Palestinian Ministry of Planning, which was speculating on different uses for these colonies/suburbs when in Palestinian hands. The Decolonizing Architecture Institute [DAi] deals with similar issues, with what we call the future archaeology of the West Bank, these still occupied buildings.

Our problem is how to use the architecture of occupation in a way that does not reproduce but rather breaks the relationship of power and form. The task is to identify the potential that remains within the buildings and reorient it rather than reproduce their original use. In Gaza

we attempted to convert the network of suburbs into a matrix of public institutions by re-using the existing infrastructure. The question was how such programs as cultural centers, school clinics, and the like could be spatialized in that very mundane, suburban layout. Imagine an entire suburban geography taking on another use.

The work was based on a network of local affiliations and the historical archives we have gathered from our previous research. My colleagues Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti have also authored books on space and conflict. Because we operated under the condition of Israel's occupation, the dilemma of our practice was how to act both propositionally and critically in this context. We were sometimes wondering whether intervention was possible at all.

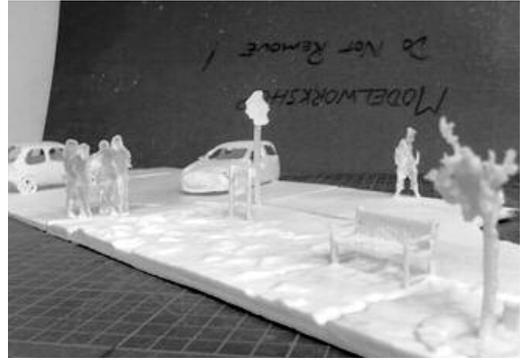
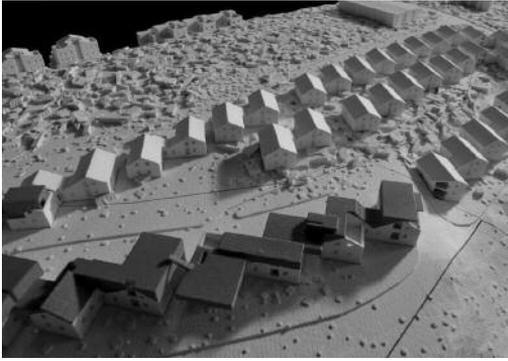
We assumed that a viable approach is found not only in the professional language of architecture and planning, but also in inaugurating what we called an "arena of speculation" that incorporates a multiplicity of individuals and organizations. We ended up replacing more established modes of architectural production with a collaborative architectural residency program that combines discourse, spatial intervention, education, collective learning, public meetings, and the mobilization of architecture in posing legal challenges. Our attempt was to open up the discipline and praxis of "architecture" – understood as the production of rarefied buildings and urban structures – into a shifting network of "spatial practices" that includes various other forms of intervention. The residency program is now growing to make DAi a new architectural center in Palestine. It has already brought in groups of international practitioners – architects, artists, activists, urbanists, filmmakers, and curators – to work within the framework we have set up.

*TDC: How does the practice of architecture in zones of conflict – for example, even the filing or production of documents – itself become a process of research to expose the many spatial paradoxes? What discourses does the model produce in the context of decolonizing architecture?*

EW: We used architectural models as tools in the legal, political, and territorial process. Maybe here is where forensics as a design strategy starts. Urban and architectural models have always shaped political discussions, of course. We have learned that putting a physical architectural model in the center of a discussion table surrounded by stakeholders can be extremely effective. Whenever we presented and discussed our models – which are sometimes ironic and often provocative spatial interventions in the existing reality – with resident groups, NGOs, landowners, and municipalities, other things happen. People, as I said before, like models. We sometimes produce our models specifically with the intention of producing architectural forensics that have not only a story to tell but a claim to make – although the latter is sometimes seemingly impossible and provocative.

*TDC: Do you think one could begin to speak about a certain right of things? I am not speaking so much about architecture – although the discussion could be expanded to include this – but about arguing for, or representing, things and objects. Or a certain right of nature or the environment, for example, the Amazon – the "right" of the river to be free.*

EW: We find that what Paulo Tavares calls "nonhuman rights" to be a frame for questioning the tradition of liberal human rights. We have permission from the mayor of Beit Sahour, a town just east of Bethlehem, to redesign a military base there that was evacuated two years ago. It is an area overlooking the town and the desert – horrific but also beautiful. It's like a



“UNGROUNDING,” MODEL: DAI WITH SITU STUDIO, 2008. RIGHT: EYAL WEIZMAN, “DOCUMENTARY SCULPTURE,” FROM A FORENSIC 3D SCAN OF A CRIME SCENE. COURTESY LEICA GEOSYSTEMS, 2010.

big fortress where soldiers continuously piled earth into ramparts until the top of the hill started to look like the crater of a volcano. By some fluke of nature, migrating birds traveling through Palestine on the way from Siberia to Africa, through the Syrian African crack, return to this specific hilltop every year. This is a fantastic spectacle, when tens, maybe hundreds, of thousands of birds circulate in swarms in the air above this hill. Some Palestinians joked that the Israelis abandoned it because of this kind of “Hitchcock effect”! We designed this site not on behalf of people but on behalf of nature, and sought to present that design in court as a claim for the rights of the birds. We were implicitly saying that here the whole notion of human rights might already be too late, and moreover, that the language of rights has of late become part of the language of the occupation itself, something that has rather confused the Israeli authorities and is still in process.

TDC: *How does your practice affect the integrity of research? Or does it?*

EW: In CRA we study, analyze and intervene in a host of political situations inasmuch as they intersect with spatial practices and forms of geopolitics. We assume, of course, that political engagement requires a close understanding of the spatial forces at play, as much as the cultural milieu in which they operate. One of the notions we have developed is an understanding of the anarchic geography of contemporary space as an evolving image of transformation, which is remade and rearranged with every political, and sometimes military, development. Conflicts – urban conflicts in particular – accelerate form-making. The material and spatial characteristic of contemporary space is what we call the “political plastic” – spatial configuration as a map of the relations between all the forces that shaped it. The political plastic cannot be understood as benign environments because highly elastic political space is often more dangerous and deadly than a static and rigid one. The actors operating within these contemporary security spaces all play their part in the diffused and anarchic, albeit collective, authorship of its spaces, so for us, architecture, that is, the formal characteristics of this elastic medium, can no longer be understood to be simply political or not political. This is the wrong question. Rather, it is “politics in matter,” and this matter is in constant movement. So we tend to think of space not as the backdrop of politics but rather as the very medium by which conflicts are conducted.

We also deal with a certain set of interrelated questions that increasingly become important to me. These are concerned with strategies that mobilize modes of documentary/aesthetic

practices: for example, the agency, as modest as it may be, of this architectural practice in political transformation. The notion of “research intervention,” or “incitatory research,” may connect the various projects that we discussed before. Some are more political, and perhaps “militant,” than others, but all are based on a commitment to understand forms of theory and research as political acts and ways of space-making in their own right. This is why areas of conflict are interesting for me – they enable formative forces to reveal themselves. All urban acts of planning are conflictual to a certain extent. And sometimes they awaken dormant positions. In other words, by setting “dormant situations” in motion, you provoke systems to reveal their tendencies and inner organizations, so by provocation one is able to produce or induce forms of knowledge. This might actually invert the concept of research and practice. If we once thought research was a prerequisite of practice and that you needed to know in order to act, provocation might reverse this logic: you act in order to know. That’s the essence of such research. The philosopher Brian Massumi called this kind of action “incitatory” – a research action ceaselessly producing its subject. I think this idea captures the nature of how we see artistic, architectural, and cultural practice as the production of knowledge.

*TDC: I am wondering if working both critically and propositionally – perhaps embodying a process that involves conflict and debate – could propose in many ways a future direction in curating architecture. The banning of the original “Civil Occupation” exhibition that you cocurated in 2002 led to a series of other commissions worldwide – at Storefront in New York and at the Kunstwerke in Berlin in conjunction with Anselm Franke – and, arguably, international recognition of the project and work. In Hollow Land you write that you initially saw the invitation for these exhibitions as opportunities to extend your research, and that you “quickly realized the unique and critical involvement and the insightful and specialized perspective of our art world partners.” In this sense, how does a certain political reading get translated into exhibition-making?*

EW: As an exhibition, research takes on another life. After the Israel Association of United Architects banned our original exhibition, we received several invitations and some modest funding to undertake research. The research must have coincided with a certain shift of interest in the art world toward documentary forms and political issues. The relationship with the art/cultural world was initially quite utilitarian in the sense that suddenly there were institutional bodies willing to finance research that could not have been conceived otherwise. As such, the art world offered a great platform. But through the process of spatializing the exhibition, of putting it in space, working with curators and people who have different aesthetic sensibilities to the visual and a different way of seeing, interpreting, and analyzing images, a lot of these viewpoints became extremely productive and were folded into the project itself. So what initially started as a quite pragmatic project ended up as a very unique collaboration in which I learned somewhat to see anew. This taught me how the practice of curating could become a method of producing and assembling visual and other forms of knowledge in ways that allow us access to different understandings of political issues and ways to intervene within them.

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