Forensics Architecture

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Forensics, etymologically, from its Latin source, means **"before the forum"**, and refers to the practice and skill of **presenting evidence** before a gathering of citizens in a forum such as a court. On the basis of artifacts, bodies, traces, medical samples, foot/finger prints, DNA samples or **spatial products**, and to the extent that they have been accepted as **evidence**, conclusions are made and decisions (like judgments) are taken.

The principle of forensics assumes that **events**, as complex and multivalented as they might be, are registered within the material properties of objects/bodies/spaces – **relational objects** that we will refer to - after Heidegger and following Latour - **"things".**

Forensics refers to rational methods set to answer legal questions in which **things become the embodiment of events**. Experts of space, science or law (also architects?) are assigned with **harvesting history** from the "things" in which it is saturated. Their legal/scientific mediation is what enables **"things to speak",** or "give testimony", something that is considered, of course, more objective than the testimony of living subjects as witnesses.

Forensics therefore implies a complex **process of translation** in which objects/things become the agents of a controversy in dispute. Its **"material rhetoric"** presents the substratum around which a public forum is formed, but also creates a forum in itself, for what count as the genuine evidence of an event is, in fact, the product of conflicts and negotiations over the very possibility of determining whether an object is what it purports to be, and what can thus be claimed in its name.

Evidence, as Thomas Keenan argues, is what we see, what is exposed or obvious to the eye... *"It exists against the backdrop of a contagion and proliferation in the field of the visible and evidential and takes us on towards the techniques and regimes of vision."*

But rather than a conclusive, objective **"vehicle of truth claims"**, spatial forensics is also inclined towards complex, sometimes unstable, and often contradictory accounts, questioning the obviousness of what directly meets the eye, raising suspicion and demanding an investigative approach through which pre-defined contracts of visibility enter into contestation. Debates are often centred on who might be authorized to speak for things, why and how, and what knowledge/technologies can legitimate **practices of translation** and authentication.

Forensic objectivity is not exactly the same as truth or **certainty**: to be objective is to aspire to knowledge that **bears no trace of the knower**, unmarked by prejudice or judgment. (We will read some Peter Galison). The neutrality historically sedimented in rational enquire holds a "truth procedure": it is responsible for "**designing the fact**" upon which legal measures are constructed, but at the same time it allows to erase the conflictive social process by which **a fact is made**. Incredibly closer yet forcibly polarized in two distinguished domains (historically separated in two sides as the "modern constitution" described by Latour), rational enquire and modern judgement come violently together into **the forensics collective forum**, opening up a space of contestation whereby truth and history stand in the place of the charged.

Forensics Forum

Forensics – what is proper to the court of law, the place of trial, is thus **what performs or enacts the law**, or better perhaps, **the enactment of a space** in which the law is enacted as the coming-to-judgement.

There are several ways to think the interaction of **space and law** through forensics. Forensics is concerned with discourse and the relations between **objects and subjects** as they unfold in the space of the court – a space in which truth is constantly established anew and as a **collective construct**. Architectural forensics is thus a matter of a gathering together in this forum around objects of concern. Through forensics the evidence [mostly material] and the forum [mostly social] are combined into a **political hybrid**.

The forum is not necessarily that of the court. In classic urban terms, forensics could be thought of as the very **performance of the polis** – as the question of the assembly. It is the ground of the 'proper' – the plenum of citizens gathered together to hear and to judge. Forensics opens thus, through speech and hearing, a visual and aural space organized around and anchored in things. The truth has to be made to appear, to be heard, and thus to be witnessed. Forensics is therefore also a truth condition – a judgment indexes the facticity of the matters laid before it.

Example: think of contemporary political debates regarding the rubble of Gaza - 20,000 destroyed and damaged buildings. A fierce political battle is now being waged about the validity of several forensic readings of this rubble: who might be authorized to read the meaning of the events (war crime or not) that are saturated in this rubble? The UN, HRW forensics experts, the Hamas government, the Israeli one? Could the rubble itself speak of the methods, means, and the intentions that lead to its destruction?

The case, the object of concern, the thing is thus locked within a precarious relation. A **heap of rubble** of a destroyed building speaks of the **processes and the forces** that distributed it thus. Forensics is in this case the reconstruction of a destruction: the forensics of buildings, a large hanger where an aircraft is meticulously reassembled to diagnose the reasons for its destruction, a wall spattered with droplets of blood – do their directional force show the location and effect of a blow? Forensics occurs thus within the "dark spaces" of unverified events, its methods combines reconstruction, destruction and dissipation.

The "truth" details an ensemble of matters necessary to answer the question "what has happened here?" An aberrant event is reconstituted, re-enacted in a way that assembles the proper order and relation of such matters. Such a staging, a mise en scène, draws in different spatial practices and techniques that invest objects and matter and make them perform. Forensics is the mediated **performance of the thing**.

Unlike the classical forums of antiquity, the contemporary forums of nowadays forensics are diffused and networked, created through and by the media, and dwell in international institutions. **Procedures of justice exceed the space of the law**, embodying a set of knowledge/technologies not traditionally represented as part of the court yet crucial for the (re) construction of a fact in dispute. As courtroom evidence, in the 19th century, photographs posed similar legal challenges as computer simulations pose today. Both are presented, by those that want to present them as such, as pale **substitutes** to first hand evidence.

An item of evidence is relevant to legal dispute, but it is hardly ever conclusive; it might makes a narrative "more probable" or "less probable". This might be called fuzzy forensics which deals with such inconclusiveness as "beyond reasonable doubt" and "the balance of probabilities". Forensics is based upon an inductive reasoning that can involve the comparing and eliminating hypotheses.

We must therefore also learn to decide what distinguishes the **talkative** thing from the **speechless** one (Lorraine Daston). And it is perhaps the ability to turn speechless things into **"matters that speak"** that constitutes one of the most pre-emptive contemporary political problems. This is not only evident in the debates regarding the rubble of Gaza. Similar situations can be identified, for example, in relation to the field of "environmental forensics", where charges of crimes against the "rights of survival" (Vandana Shiva) - such as the poisoning of traditional water resources by chemical global corporations (Chevron in Ecuador, Dow in Bophal) - can only be traced back if the enquire addresses the very nature of things, if one asks, in such cases, what their molecular constituency can speak of? To make things talk, and to construct the public forum where their speech can be heard might be the political task we pursue when taking forensics as a practice of research.

Forensics as (Spatial) Practice

Through forensics, we aim to rethink the relation between **space, law and politics**. Forensics' architectural dimension is found in its ability to produce **spatial analysis of crimes,** and also in its ability to generate the forums in which these events might acquire political significance.

A proposition: matter continuously reacts and interacts with history as a set of changing and mutating force fields. Diffused and abstract power relations of complex events **coalesce into form**. Things thus become the medium in which **forces are solidified into forms**, and material organization becomes an index of complex events (crimes). As such forensics is a way of unfolding history, **the history of the present**, from the spaces and things in which it is saturated. We can also assume that in matter we could read **the meaning of the event**, so that forensics becomes the science that articulates **a culture's beliefs** about causal powers in the material world.

Does the issue of evidence, in its legal and philosophical context, rely on the assumption that "**evidence is prior to theory**"? Or at least that theory relies and is dependent on evidence?

In its commitment to evidence and the materiality of the fact - or the facticity of matter -, forensics moves towards a methodology of research which tends to suspend any prior abstract - legal/sociological/philosophical – theoretical framework to analyse bodies, objects or spatial products in order to engage with a radical empiricism. It follows a methodology analogous to archaeology: both rely on highly detailed modes of data collection, documentation, processing and analysis, and both use present objects as evidences in order to reconstruct events and infer in their historical, cultural and political implications.

We will explore the theory and practice of forensics, and deal with its extreme repercussions in politics and international laws of war, reading and exploring its natural commitment to the spatial and material dimensions of reality alongside contemporary spatial and political theory.

How could space become forensic evidence? How could space pose questions to the law? How is the space of the forum created? How does it frame and participate in the production of truths? How does the presentation of evidence unfold within the diffused spaces of different contemporary forums? As forensic architects and researchers, you'd be collecting evidence, while thinking the nature of evidence, and the shifting political forums that these evidence might give rise to.

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