FORUMS

REPRESENTATION AND COLLABORATION IN THE WORK OF FORENSIC ARCHITECTURE AND LAWRENCE ABU HAMDAN

Christoph Chwatal

Since 2010, the research group Forensic Architecture, today tethered to the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London, has conducted various so-called 'investigations' into human rights abuses and the multifarious, systemic injustices perpetrated within nation states. This interdisciplinary group of artists and scientists takes the material traces in edifices, cityscapes, and landscapes (i.e. the built environment or 'architecture') as points of departure, and ostensibly questions modern and present-day forensics. Notably, Forensic Architecture scrutinizes forensic's associations with positivism and factuality which are perpetually exploited by states and corporations in the present.[1]

The following pages set out to unpack and reflect on the concept of the 'forum' by discussing Forensic Architecture's long-term project *Destruction and Return in al-Araqīb* (2010-ongoing) and artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan's work *Conflicted Phonemes* (2012). Forensic Architecture departs from state violence perpetrated against Palestinians by the Israeli government: in this case, an ongoing series of evictions in a Palestinian village officially unrecognized by Israel. Abu Hamdan, who is an alumni of the Forensic Architecture-affiliated Centre for Research Architecture program, shows how Western nation states and their agencies employ erroneous linguistic forensics in an attempt to determine asylum seekers' countries of origin.

Counter-Forensics

The group's practices, including that of Abu Hamdan's, are most commonly discussed in terms of their capacities to utilize technical innovation, such as developing open-source modeling and visualization tools, as in their data-based mapping platform PATTRN. Their attempts to dismantle present-day state policing techniques or develop counter-surveillance technology for civilian policing of the police have also attracted attention. The collective often presents their projects within art contexts and many critics seem to take their cues from these presentations. In such settings, the messiness and potential open-endedness of their fieldwork vanishes into lucid spaces. Discreet and clean, their presentations seem to both deflect and cater to unbridled desires for technicity in a time of networked cognition. Although their work includes rendering data, footage, or cognitive protocols into complex digital assemblages, this essay focuses on the group's collaborations with communities and nongovernmental organizations. Hereby, they create esthetically as well as politically promising 'forums', which strive towards active engagement and self-critique rather than settling for critiques of representation that are driven by technology.

Forensic Architecture frequently describes their practice as pursuing "counter-investigation" [2] or "counter-forensics." [3] This appears to be a central, methodological-political stance, as, for theorist and founder of Forensic Architecture Eyal Weizman, the 'Israeli Left' was too engaged in external critique through abstraction.[4] Beginning with his 2007 book, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, Weizman has engaged in bridging critique and theory with a practice-based approach, often following methods of investigative journalism and militant research. This leads him to contend that presently, it is "no longer enough to critique the politics of representation." [5]

Forensic Architecture's investigative projects are usually commissioned by directly affected communities or by non-state agencies. Spearheaded by Weizman, the group has consistently labelled itself as a 'research agency'. It is composed of an interdisciplinary team of researchers spanning architects, artists, computer scientists, historians, human rights scholars or activists, many of whom pursue MA or PhD theses during their time with the agency. The institution is funded by the European Research Council's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme, as well as by various other foundations and trusts, ensuring a diversity in funding bodies.[6]

Both the organizational structure (directors and teams of researchers, course structures, academic supervision and curricula) and the agency's branding and communication strategies differ significantly from more informal (militant) research practices which seemed so central in Weizman's earlier writings, such as *Hollow Land*. The informal practices of individual artists may also be networked and collaborative, and yet remain willingly or unwillingly less formalized.[7] Forensic Architecture has hence evolved beyond a loosely associated collective of artist-researchers. More so it has come to constitute and organize (and thus *institute*) an entire field of research spanning art and architecture, the humanities, human rights law, and nongovernmental politics. In short, it has both forged as well as institutionalized what is widely discussed as a forensic turn in the contemporary arts.[8]

1 As an heir of the nineteenth century's fever of classification and its more general climate of scientific positivism, forensic science today continues to insist on objective truth and 'facts'. This seems all the more problematic in an era dubbed 'post-truth.' Forensic Architecture's work thus sets out to challenge the ongoing devaluation and exclusion of other types of knowledge, be they historical or present-day.

2 See for instance in the title of the exhibition *Counter Investigations: Forensic Architecture* at the Institute of Contemporary Art — ICA, London (March 7 — May 13, 2018).

3 Thomas Keenan, "Counter-forensics and Photography," *Grey Room*, no. 55 (Spring 2014): 58–77. Keenan, a human rights scholar and collaborator of Forensic Architecture, draws on the concept of "counter-forensics," coined by artist Alan Sekula.

4 Yves-Alain Bois et al., "On Forensic Architecture: A Conversation with Eyal Weizman," *October*, no. 156 (Spring 2016): 119.

5 Ibid., 120.

6 Between 2011 and 2020, these included a civil society grant of the David & Elaine Potter Foundation (UK), the human rights foundation Sigrid Rausing Trust (UK), the Oak Foundation (CH), and the Open Society Foundations (US). Additional funding stems from commissioned works and exhibition projects via institutional funding channels of the arts. Exhibition projects usually serve to co-finance ongoing and future work and projects.

7 Collectives pursuing similar goals include the Palestine-based DAAR (Decolonizing Art and Architecture Residency), co-founded by Forensic Architecture's Eyal Weizman in 2007, or the US-based SITU research collective, founded in 2005.

8 Charles Stankievech, "Exhibit A: Notes on a Forensic Turn in Contemporary Art," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 47 (Spring/Summer 2019). The "forensic turn," as Stankievech notes, can be understood as further pushing the archival and documentary turn of the 1990s and early 2000s.

The etymology of the term 'forum' dates back to ancient Rome's multilayered space of politics, the social, and the law. Forensic Architecture refers to this and seems to pursue two related agendas. Firstly, their materialist approach expands the act of speaking (and thus bearing witness) to objects, architecture, and landscapes, notably invoking the concept of *prosopopoeia*, the rhetoric involved in "letting objects speak."[9] Secondly, they distinguish between 'fields' and 'forums.' While the former designates the terrains of struggle on which evidence is collected, or the matter is at stake, the latter can tentatively be understood as locales of presentation and representation. In the case of Forensic Architecture's practice, the formats of such forums range from exhibitions to the presentation of findings at truth commissions or in legal contexts.

Early traces of this terminology can also be found in Weizman's book *Hollow Land*. Here he speaks of the forum as an "arena of interpretation."[10] This use of the term (as well as his earlier use of the term 'arena') recalls philosopher Bruno Latour's writings on "matters of concern."[11] Perhaps more centrally, it insinuates the French philosopher-sociologist's popularization of *Dingpolitik* (as an antithesis to *Realpolitik's* austerity), which has been influential in the context of the arts.[12] Weizman, however, departs from Latour by acknowledging the specific potentials and limitations of militant research vis-à-vis more institutionalized forms of knowledge and truth production, to which Latour seems to adhere. In short, if we follow Weizman, militant research practices can (and must) serve as corrective of institutionally backed scientific concepts. This serves to derive sensemaking not solely from an ostensibly neutral and objective scientific viewpoint, but to include types of knowledge that fall outside the frame of institutional Western concepts of knowledge.[13]

Tribunals and Nongovernmental Politics

Incorporating their reflections about the formation of public and legal forums, Forensic Architecture combines and further pushes two developmental traits over the 1990s; the institutionalization of truth finding commissions and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), as well as the increasing influence of nongovernmental politics.[14] Tribunals and nongovernmental politics are not mere counter-movements, anti-institutionalist or anti-state undertakings, but rather evolving complementary forums of enunciation. By today, these politics have morphed into widely acknowledged means of conflict resolution, mediation, and public truth seeking in both historical cases and ongoing struggles.

9
Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 65.

10
Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London/New York: Verso, 2007), 105.

11
Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry*, no. 30 (Winter 2004): 225–48.

12
Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public," in *Making Things Public-Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

13
It remains to ask as to how the institutionalization of Forensic Architecture has influenced this position.

14
A third genealogy, which will not be discussed here, is Forensic Architecture's relation to counter-hegemonic knowledge production in the arts of the early 2000s, especially in the 'Middle East' (e.g. the work of artists such as Rabih Mroué or Walid Raad).

Starting in the 1990s as a manifestation of transitional justice processes, truth and reconciliation commissions and tribunals have evolved into common forums of political, legal, and public debate.[15] This is evidenced by the achievements of tribunals such as the ICTY, which was convened following a 1993 resolution of the United Nations Security Council and served until 2017 in The Hague.[16] Weizman contends that the ICTY "demonstrates that often the evidence precedes, and may call forth, the construction of the forum."[17] Art historian Sven Lütticken has termed the construction of such forums and their performative dimensions in an arts context as "paralegal performativity."[18] This can best be grasped in prefigurations or preenactments of the yet-to-come as simultaneously imaginative and real forms. "When transposed into an arts context, truth commissions and tribunals are hence not merely imaginary or fictive, but draft concrete forms of justice." Understanding tribunals in their faculties of publicity and as mediatized "road shows," Lütticken argues that they should be understood as having an impact on public opinion.[19] Despite not being legally binding and taking a non-judicial form, artistic work that mimics (and subverts) the form of the tribunal can work toward imagining new institutions which are apt to pursue action in the future—an attempt confirmed by the increasing diversity of alternative political forums in the present.

Following a second genealogical line, forums can be compared to what the scholars of nongovernmental politics Meg McLagan and Yates McKee have termed "platforms:" "the performative context in which a circulating object stages its public presence, so to speak, so that its claims can be made."[20] For McLagan and McKee, platforms are widely defined and can range from documentary films to human rights reports and legal cases. Nongovernmental politics compliment rather than oppose institutionalized political forums. This is demonstrated by the work and campaigning of the ever-increasing number and influence of nongovernmental organizations. While these two genealogies embed the work of Forensic Architecture in larger debates around political representation and legal action, their practice of enacting 'forums' is also bound to a temporality that distinguishes it further from critical art practices: it builds on long-term forms of engagement with various actors across social fields.

The Conflict Shoreline

This focus on the long-run becomes evident in an ongoing project that now spans a decade: Weizman's research into the so-called "battle over the Negev" or Naqab.[21] This is an arid area in the south of Israel which

15
For an influential survey of nongovernmental organizations and activists' concerns (and demands) and their modes of intervening in politics see: Michel Feher, Gaëlle Krikorian, and Yates McKee, eds., *Nongovernmental Politics* (New York: Zone Books, 2007). For an influential survey of nongovernmental organizations and activists' concerns (and demands) and their modes of intervening in politics see: Michel Feher, Gaëlle Krikorian, and Yates McKee, eds., *Nongovernmental Politics* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

16
See: Resolution 827 as adopted by the UN Security Council at its 3217th meeting on May 25, 1993.

17
Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London/New York: Verso, 2011), 110.

18
Sven Lütticken, "Trials & Tribunals, Reconstructions & Reenactments: Notes on Paralegal Performativity" (Symposium Over and Over and Over Again: Re-Enactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory, ICI Berlin, November 16, 2017); See also: Sven Lütticken, "Actors and Directors," *Texte Zur Kunst*, May 3, 2018, https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/actors-and-directors/.

19
Cornelia Vismann, "Tele-Tribunals: Anatomy of a Medium," trans. Sara Ogger, *Grey Room*, no. 10 (Winter 2003): 9.

20
Meg McLagan and Yates McKee, "Introduction," in *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Politics*, ed. Meg McLagan and Yates McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 16.

21
Eyal Weizman and Fazal Sheikh, *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonialism as Climate Change in the Negev Desert* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015), 7.

is delineated less by physical barriers such as walls, than by largely invisible legal barriers. This manifests as a legally effective border of cultivation, determined by annual precipitation and used to classify land as either desert or arable. Besides dismantling the underlying ideologies of the scientific framework (the intricate relation of land classification and economic principles of cultivation) and its legal consequences, Weizman and Forensic Architecture's research on the issue also explores a widely overlooked aspect among the manifold and persisting effects and systemic injustices of the Palestinian struggle. This struggle can be dated back to the *an-Nakba*, the dislocation and coinciding exodus following the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. Weizman's text is accompanied by archival documents and the image contributions by photographer Fazal Sheikh. Here, text and image combine to document the *long durée* as well as the more immediate consequences and repercussions of the conflict. However, the publication is just one manifestation of Forensic Architecture's multifarious work connected to both the issues of climate change and human rights and their interconnected relationship.

With a specific connection to the Palestinian village of al-ʿAraqīb in the south of Israel, their project *Destruction and Return in al-Araqīb* was conducted in collaboration with the Israeli nongovernmental organization Zochrot (Hebrew for 'remembering') and a range of other organizations and individuals.[22] Here the group utilized both historical research, aerial photography as well as self-made 'civic satellites' and collections of oral testimonies. In one presentation of the findings, lead researcher Ariel Caine assembled a multifaceted model consisting of testimony, documents, satellite imagery, video and audio recordings and other types of data. These findings have been presented in different forums, from legal cases to an on-site public forum called the *Ground Truth Forum* in the early days of 2016 (fig. 1). The forum served to present and discuss the findings of a truth commission report conducted by Zochrot. More importantly however, it demonstrated how central testimony and collaborative truth production are to Forensic Architecture's practice, directing sensemaking at the communities affected by structural injustice.

22
This included the community science collective The Public Laboratory for Open Technology and Science (Public Lab), the artist collective Activestills, the law firms Michael Sfard (UK) and Carmel Pomerantz (IL), the Association of Unrecognised Villages, and the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality.

←fig. 1 The temporary hall of the Ground Truth Forum (January 1-2, 2016), copyright: Forensic Architecture.

Alluding to the practice of a private investigator (or private eye), artist-researcher Lawrence Abu Hamdan has variously been described as a "private ear" and "forensic listener."[23] In line with his 2012 work *Conflicted Phonemes* (to which various previous and subsequent works are connected in one way or another), his PhD-in-practice thesis, *Aural Contract: Investigations at the Threshold of Audibility* (2018), focuses on the audio technologies used in legal cases. These technologies are currently employed by linguistic forensics in European nation states to determine the origins of asylum seekers.[24] Abu Hamdan claims that, "historical and theoretical enquiry feeds into the practice, while the practice interrogates and attempts to materially implement these critical assumptions as political audio investigations for human and civil rights."[25]

For *Conflicted Phonemes* (2012), Abu Hamdan has worked with Casco, an Utrecht-based art institution and Stichting LOS (Landelijk Ongedocumenteerden Steunpunt, an at that time Utrecht-based foundation which acts as a national support center for undocumented people). Among others involved, this project benefitted from a further collaboration with De Taalstudio ('The Language Studio'), an organization offering 'counter-expertise' in immigration and asylum cases in The Netherlands. As an independent expert organization in linguistics, it can be commissioned by individual asylum seekers or their legal aids to appeal decisions by the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security's Immigration and Naturalization Service. Similar to Abu Hamdan's and Forensic Architecture's practice, De Taalstudio, provides a corrective to technology-driven and scientifically affirmed policing practices.

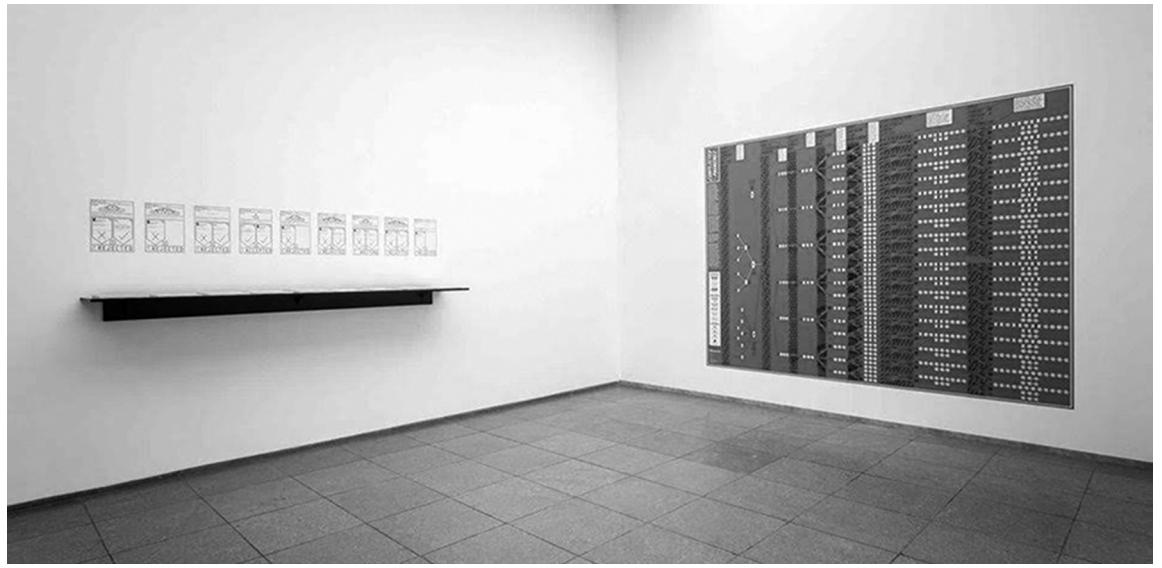
In a recent presentation at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof (October 26, 2019 — March 29, 2020), this collaborative work took on the shape of a wall-piece and a series of leaflets which sketch the process of rejection of a group of Somali refugees. The installation brongs together the artist's research, a series of meetings, and the findings of both Stichting LOS and De Taalstudio into a sensible form (fig. 2). The accompanying exhibition catalogue discusses the political potentials and the complex technical aspects of his practice at length; it is, however, worthwhile noting that there is no mention of how his practice is bound to collaborative efforts with nongovernmental organizations.[26] The presentation seemingly neutralizes both the findings and the collaborative nature of the artist's work through a mode of display that strongly hinges on an aesthetics of institutional critique (drawing on the use of charts, diagrams, and, more generally a rather neutralized and administrative logic). However, Abu Hamdan's practice goes beyond an exterior understanding of critique: disavowing a

23
The former is a self-description of the artist's acoustic-artistic research practice, while the latter points at Abu Hamdan's affiliation with Forensic Architecture. See: http://lawrenceabuhamdan.com/info and my short profile of the artist for the 2020 annual program of the Association of Visual Artists Vienna Secession: https://www.secession.at/en/exhibition/lawrence-abu-hamdan/

24
Lawrence Abu Hamdan, "Aural Contract: Investigations at the Threshold of Audibility" (PhD-dissertation, London, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2018).

25
Ibid.

26
Ina Dinter, ed., *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: The Voice before the Law* (Berlin: Hamburger Bahnhof — Museum für Gegenwart, 2019), Exhibition catalogue.



↑fig. 2 Installation view of the exhibition *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: The Voice Before the Law,* copyright: Lawrence Abu Hamdan, courtesy Maureen Paley, London / Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Schenkung Baloise Group / Mathias Völzke.

seemingly neutral standpoint outside, 'forum-work,' as practiced here, envisions and implements novel critical models of collaboration and organization, re-negotiating the borders of art and the social, the institution and the public sphere.

Instituent Practices

As demonstrated in the al-ʿAraqīb project and Abu Hamdan's *Conflicted Phonemes*, the emergence of Forensic Architecture exhibits an ongoing shift away from short-term project work and the rather exterior understanding of critique still prevalent in artistic production of the 1990s. In this contemporary practice, we can grasp a move towards long-term forms of strategic collaboration involving actors from a variety of social fields, ranging from local activist groups to nongovernmental organizations and counter-expertise foundations such as Stichting LOS. This type of long-term and 'sustainable' cross-sectoral engagement reflects a contemporary understanding of common social production and the notion of "cooperative subjectivities."[27]

Art practitioners have increasingly reacted to the waning of the state, an intensification of what has been variously described as post-democracy, and new forms of neoliberal governmentality. This has often taken the form of inter-sectoral collaborations and comes partly in response to the reception of political theory.[28] There have been persistent callss for new social imaginations alongside the creation of social and political organizational forms to support and enable them. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe, for instance, considered the future perspectives of artistic and activist practice.[29] Expanding upon this, she posited that it would be necessary to move forward in effectively combatting hegemony and present-day new forms of governmentality through fording transversal links between "social movements, parties and trade-unions."[30]

On a different note, expanding upon the legacies of institutional critique, in his periodization and fashioning of the term "instituent practices," philosopher Gerald Raunig has urged for "practices that conduct radical social criticism" while abandoning an "imagined distance to institutions."[31] Instituent practices build on two earlier waves of institutional critique in the 1970s and in the 1990s as a "new artistic internationalism developing in conjunction with political activism."[32] While institutional critique artists of the second generation, such as Andrea Fraser, had forged a move toward immanent critiques of the art field and thus self-critique, these more recent practitioners act in increasingly transversal and networked ways.[33] Similarly, the networked practice of Forensic Architecture and the likes can be better understood upon consideration of the pitfalls of contemporary institutionalized critical and political art, as well the (re-)emergence of "edu-tainment" formats in the neoliberal experience and entertainment complex.[34]

Meta-Forums

The extensive publications, theoretical frameworks, lectures and research seminars taught at the Centre for Research Architecture, as well as exhibitions in art institutions, workshops, presentations in legal forums, and self-organized assemblies, are not merely channels of distribution but rather interconnected locales or forums of presentation and spaces, where a variety of actors across diverse social fields gather. Within this meshwork, exhibitions appear to be a particular type of forum, "uniquely suited (...) to question the very constitution of forums in general."[35] The exhibition, which we could well term 'meta-forum,' is hence one out of a multiplicity of forums.

This understanding of the relation of exhibition-making and the social and political field reflects the increasingly discursive nature of exhibitions, where curatorial and artistic practices are geared towards providing spaces where counter-hegemonic knowledge is produced and disseminated, both testing and enacting possible repercussions beyond their confined space. Both projects

27 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 295.

28 For a recent artistic-scholarly account on the issue of organization in the artistic field see: Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019); See my review of the book: Christoph Chwatal, "Book Review: Jonas Staal, 'Propaganda Art in the 21st Century,'" *Third Text Online*, January 16, 2020, http://thirdtext.org/chwatal-staalreview.

29 Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Antagonistic Spaces," *Art&Research* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 5.

30 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London/New York: Verso, 2013), 75.

31 Gerald Raunig, "Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming," in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFlyBooks, 2009), 11.

32 Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, eds., *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* (London: MayFlyBooks, 2009), xv.

33 Besides Fraser (who suggests to have used the term "institutional critique" the first time in print in an essay on Louise Lawler, published in 1985), the work of Fareed Armaly, Mark Dion or Renée Green are usually invoked when discussing the "second wave" of institutional critique in the 1990s. Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (September 2005): 278–83. For a recent perspective on how artistic practitioners have revisited the legacies of institutional critique after the 2011 Occupy Movements see for instance: MTL Collective, "From Institutional Critique to Institutional Liberation? A Decolonial Perspective on the Crises of Contemporary Art," *October*, no. 165 (Summer 2018): 192–227.Besides Fraser (who suggests to have used the term "institutional critique" the first time in print in an essay on Louise Lawler, published in 1985), the work of Fareed Armaly, Mark Dion or Renée Green are usually invoked when discussing the "second wave" of institutional critique in the 1990s. Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (September 2005): 278–83. For a recent perspective on how artistic practitioners have revisited the legacies of institutional critique after the 2011 Occupy Movements see for instance: MTL Collective, "From Institutional Critique to Institutional Liberation? A Decolonial Perspective on the Crises of Contemporary Art," *October*, no. 165 (Summer 2018): 192–227.

34 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London/New York: Verso, 2012), 274.

35 Forensic Architecture, ed., *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 492.