

What is Forensic Aesthetics?

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Eyal Weizman and Thomas Keenan. *Mengel's Skull: The Advent of Forensic Aesthetics*. Sternberg Press. 2012. 88 pp.

Eyal Weizman. *Forensic Architecture: Notes From Fields and Forums*. Hatje Cantz. 2012. 44 pp.

Eyal Weizman. *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*. Verso. 2012. 336 pp.

In the fall of 1996, mere months after the optimism from the Oslo Accords had distilled across the Palestinian population, Eyal Weizman began “a year in the field” in Tel Aviv studying urban planning. A graduate student with London’s Architecture Association School, Weizman worked in Ramallah with the Palestinian Ministry of Planning (PMP) (McKee and McLagan). He was asked as the only Israeli among Palestinian and Norwegian planners to access Israel’s restricted cartography archives. In a time before satellite imagery became accessible via the internet, the PMP sought evidence of Israel’s settlement incursions into and further militarization of Palestine. Within days Weizman found images that contradicted many of Oslo’s promises. Where Oslo mandated imminent Palestinian political autonomy, regional peace, and the right of return for its diaspora, the photos and maps revealed Israeli’s brisk dismantling of Palestine’s infrastructure.

Where Oslo signified plans for coexistence, Weizman and his colleagues collected a trove of photos to show how Israel’s unabated occupation was isolating enclaves that Palestinians needed to survive, venerated as sacred, and built over generations of social tradition. Fast forward to February of 2016: the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs recorded the highest number of demolitions in the West Bank since 2009. In February of 2016 alone, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) “destroyed, dismantled or confiscated 235 homes and other structures, displacing 331 Palestinians...and affecting another 740 Palestinians” (United Nations, n.p.).

Israel’s incursions into Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem date back to the inception of the State of Israel in 1948; however, the policies of settlement and militarization reinforced one another after the Six-Day War in 1967 and have intensified over a half century of transnational support (i.e., arms deals, economic sanctions).

Edward Said described international influence in the post-Oslo era as fostering a “political and moral climate...a good deal cruder and more reductive” than all previous periods (Said 168).

What are the prospects, then, of reconstructing a case of Israel’s destruction of Palestine, when the means for reparations — legal, military, political — seem foreclosed? How might the Israeli state be made accountable when international sanctions place them beyond the bind of the law? Weizman’s research trespasses through the entangling material and barbed discursive build-up that impedes legal engagement with such questions and connections.

The images Weizman retrieved in 1996 sparked his formulation of “forensic aesthetics.” His seminal work, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (2007), uses one hundred and nineteen images (i.e., maps, infographics, video stills, topographical sketches, etc.) to recount Israel’s territorial policies from 1981-2003. He retells the region’s geographical history through representations of the built environment. He catalogues a litany of the Israel’s architectural projects in *Hollow Land*. They include: hilltop settlements built to survey non-Israelis, arbitrary checkpoints pocking travel routes to slow and stifle social association, traffic tunnels dug for sole use by Israelis, village streets widened for tank and jeep access, roofs painted crimson to differentiate non-bombing sites from “optimal targets,” hydroelectric and sanitation channels rebuilt to direct the flow of water, and forty foot high barriers erected to monitor and “swarm” villagers. The coordination of these projects over the last two decades violate every part of Palestinians’ lives.

Weizman’s critical itinerary, then, arranges all available forms of visible evidence to understand how the Israeli state attacks the root of Palestinian life. Analogous to Ariella Azoulay, Edward Said, Gideon Levy and Ilan Pappé’s critiques of Israel, Weizman’s claim is that Palestine suffers from Israel’s control of space. “If you look at [the archival images] closely,” Weizman recalls, “you can notice that [the land] registers the forces that act upon it. In this conflict, and in territorial conflicts in general, you cannot say that politics ‘happen in space,’ but rather that they happen by space. Space is not the set of abstract coordinates on which the events of politics unfold, but something that is transformed and remade by every political action that takes place within it” (McKee and McLagan 430). “Space” thus demarcates a perpetual crime scene in need of precise documentation.

Who, then, is primarily responsible for the extension of the occupation’s land claim? Weizman names three connected parties: Israel’s civil engineers, humanitarian institutions, and waves of political regimes initiated by Ariel Sharon (nicknamed “The Bulldozer”) from the 1970s. Though Israeli civil engineers were politicized during

Sharon's ascent through Israeli government, they unified in 1981 under the Civil Administration (ICA). Mandated by Israel's *HaAvoda* (left of centre) Labor Party, Sharon drew the blueprint for the ICA to fortify and expand Israel's control of the region. Since the ICA consists of civilian planners led by the IDF, the ICA gained extra-judicial powers protecting them from legal prosecution. An army's territorial strategies require civilian intermediaries who have the know-how to confirm the usefulness of architectural projects. Weizman's critique, in part, untangles how the ICA-IDF nexus bypasses international prosecution to transform the most basic qualities of the land. In less than a decade, the policies of "development" and "security" have allowed ICA planners to align the flows of the area's resources with the Israeli State's engineering protocol, zoning claims and military forecasts. The ICA established ways to pre-empt attacks by extending the surveillance and aerial reach of the IDF into Palestinian land. Raids of private residences and airstrike assassinations are now commonplace.

The humanitarian agencies who flooded the region after Oslo also expedited Palestinians' alienation from their land. The Peres-Arafat handshake all but invited third party "experts" into a quagmire of advocacy. Planners for Planning Rights, B'tselem, and hundreds others, coordinated by the United Nations, impede Palestine's goal of direct sovereignty. Oslo's eventful failure should have signaled to NGOs, as it did for Weizman and the PMP, an end to rights-based struggles. The infrastructural conditions of the occupation should have gained a tighter focus for NGOs and their plans for action. Instead, humanitarians 'intervened' with ineffectual, pre-1996, aims. With virtually no precedent of decommissioning massive buildings and roadways (perhaps their most urgent task), or of demilitarizing Israel, activists plod forth today advocating on behalf of the dignity of human life, articulating fungible notions of self-determination, and claiming that peace is simply one policy agreement away.

Weizman contends that the NGO's role in Palestine is that of a potentially lethal mediator shrouded in legalese. "Humanitarianism," he writes, "human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL), when abused by state, supra-state and military action, become the crucial means by which the economy of violence is calculated and managed" (*The Least of Possible Worlds* 4). For one, the humanitarian response has simply elevated "cosmopolitan" expert analytics over local Palestinian knowledge. While empathetic experts from different parts of the planet arrive on site to number crunch the violence, Gaza is dismantled and remade in the image and at the service of Tel Aviv. Weizman's account provides many reasons why no treaty will uproot the steel and concrete the ICA has set in place. Israel's occupation has been built since the early 1970s to withstand regime change, economic flux, social instability, cultural trends, and large scale events that might trigger a renewed Palestinians effort to reclaim their homeland. The built environment stands as a living monument against

negotiation.

Palestinians have known for decades that sovereignty is possible only after decolonization, through a concerted effort of “counter-planning,” that reconfigures the public and private spaces of their cities. An enduring practice of collective land proprietorship in Palestine is called *al-mashà* or “common land.” Defying the public and private distinction, *al-mashà* elicits no unilateral relation between inhabitant and space; instead, Palestinians expropriate land from private owners to retain the particular qualities of the land itself: the reconstitution of soil quality, the sacredness of religious land, the interpersonal connectivity of streets, and so on. Weizman details strategies of “counter-planning” that, in effect, focalize previously vague notions of “resistance.” He and other critics call for a dismantling of settlements and a categorical demilitarization; they also insist that decolonization must mobilize site specific plans for the future use of land and buildings (cf. Petti, Hilal, and Weizman). Weizman learned much from his daily retrievals of maps. Far more than what the images showed or occluded. *Hollow Land* recounts attempts by Palestinians to counteract the theft of land with their own plans. Coordinated Palestinian participation thus makes the humanitarian role in the area not only superfluous but an impediment to achieving these ends.

What might any of this have to do with the practice of forensics? Weizman makes the term most explicit in two separate works, *Forensic Architecture: Notes from Fields and Forums*, *Mengele’s Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (co-written with Thomas Keenan) and his edited volume *Forensics: An Architecture of Public Truth* (Sternberg Press, 2014). In these texts, the word “forensic” resonates with the popular meaning of the word as well as its more complicated etymology. Both senses of the term help elucidate Weizman’s usage. The popular meaning of “forensics” signals a fetishistic relation to knowledge — something that critics elsewhere have denounced (cf. Robinson) — reliant on a loose method of examining crimes to recover details for legal prosecution.

In *Mengele’s Skull*, Weizman and Keenan cast forensic inquiry on a smaller scale than the built environment. They look into the case made by experts from organizations such as the Simon Weisenthal Center to find Joseph Mengele, a former Nazi leader. Weizman sees in the investigation a shift in how legal experts interpret past instances of violence. They write, “if the [Adolf] Eichmann trial effectively introduced the victim-as-witness to the stage of history, and changed the space of the law in the process, we see a similar transformation underway in the appearance of bones and other objects in the emerging human rights tribunals of the late twentieth century” (Keenan and Weizman 30). The shift in legal investigations from parsing testimony to testing physical and digital materials means that our aesthetic capacities will also

need to adapt to readily perceive emergent techniques of historical reconstruction.

A second meaning of “forensics” derives from public forums and fields of investigations into legal events. It puts into question who is involved. This meaning of forensics has been in circulation since Roman jurisprudence—*forensis* is Latin for “pertaining to the forum.” Investigations into violent acts once included all of a city’s practitioners: architects, business people, commoners, economists, etc. Once organized in legal protocol, forensics became “the mode of appearance of things in forums—the gestures, techniques, and technologies of demonstration; methods of theatricality, narrative and dramatization; image enhancement and technologies of projection; the creation and demolition of reputation, credibility and competence” (Weizman, *Forensic Architecture* 10). This institutional precedent of forensic aesthetics was important for Weizman’s own work, since an entire fabric of regional Palestinian-Israeli architecture was made into an “open work” or interpretable totality and held to legal standards of investigation. “An emergent forensic sensibility,” Weizman explains, includes “an object-oriented juridical culture immersed in matter and materialities, in code and form, and in the presentation of scientific investigations by experts” (ibid. 6). Weizman avoids far-reaching claims from what he finds. A forensic approach is a legal-politico investigation of multiple experts and vanishing lines of partially effaced inquiry. Where the traditional interpretation of architecture for aesthetic perception is based in a unilateral and affirmative relation of the observer and her object—think here of the architect, the photographer, the *flâneur*, the tourist, etc.. Weizman complicates the direct line of aesthetic perception by attending to the multiple military forces that seek to eliminate visible signs of collective insurgency.

After his work with the PMP, Weizman founded Decolonizing Architecture (DAAR) in the West Bank, comprising a network of architects and planners who research forms of anti- and counter-colonial architecture. Palestinian planners face multiple challenges in trying to visualize the occupation, not the least of which is the difficulty of intervening against practices which merely aestheticize political conflict. “The occupation had simply changed form,” Israeli columnist Gideon Levy wrote in 2010, “the jailer pulled out of the jail and is now holding its captives from without” ((Levy viii). In addition to killing, maiming and displacing hundreds of thousands since 1948, Israel has built approximately 15,000 square kilometres of infrastructure to block Palestinian self-governance. In contemporary urban planning, one is hard pressed to think of densely populated public spaces more dangerous and rigged for attack against its inhabitants than the Palestinian territories. Decolonization’s impasse is clear from Levy’s quote: the Israeli state has isolated Palestinians by controlling the region as if it were an extra-judicial space of sovereignty.

With nearly ten million Palestinians barred from re-entering Palestine, representa-

tions of Israel's bulldozing, emptying, and reconstruction of Palestine is perceivable, without having to be there, for those curious enough to look. Forensic aesthetics is perceptual, but it is also based in the interpretation of artistic forms.

Feature films such as Hany Abu-Assad's 2005 "Paradise Now," documentaries such as Yoav Shamir's 2003 "Checkpoint" or Ido Haar's 2008 "9 Star Hotel" and photo essays, including the recent *Keep Your Eye on the Wall* (2013), Malkit Shoshan's *Atlas of Conflict* (2013) and Fazal Sheikh's *Erasure* (2016), frame views of snipers criss-crossing courtyards, dusty roadways, poured concrete barriers, and inhabitants denied a daily life of their desires. Urban occupations, Weizman reminds us, rely on the transformation of space into imminently accessible enclaves whose representation — visual or otherwise — might be instantly cut off from the outside world. Exclusive military access to space works best when combined with the termination of its public representation.

Weizman's montage of the region parallels the imagery of these prominent art forms. He uses representations of built space from locally sourced archival materials to not only to make the world witness to the drastic transformation of Palestine. He seeks an end to the occupation by directly opposing Israel's attempts to cover-up the realities of these militarized spaces.

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