Hassu Khel, North Waziristan, Pakistan

Three reported killed in the Mir Ali area. On the same day, a US drone crashed in South Waziristan.

Proportionality, Violence, and the Economy of Calculations
—Eyal Weizman in Conversation with Heather Davis

Dronestagram excerpts from James Bridle.
The Guardian recently reported that the US has set up a predator drone base just outside of Niamey, Niger, extending its surveillance regime while providing another base for extra-judicial killings and internationalized terror. Meanwhile, US Secretary of State John Kerry is trying to reinvigorate peace talks between Israel and Palestine amidst rumors of a new intifada and renewed rocket fire from Gaza. To confront these realities without accepting their terms as given, Eyal Weizman's work as an architect, professor, theorist, and activist addresses the use of systems of surveillance, mapping, NGOs, and international human rights law. His ongoing work and collaborations with artists, architects, and theorists in Forensic Architecture (FA), the Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency (DAAR), and the Centre for Research Architecture, navigate current political realities through a direct engagement with, and elaboration of, incommensurable positions. This is precisely why his work is so compelling. Weizman's concept of forensic architecture analyzes the contradictory role of critical thought within international humanitarian law, using the tools of journalistic investigation and the humanitarian figure, that he himself critiques. In both his writing and ongoing architecture projects, Weizman demonstrates that the division between amelioration and revolution is false; instead, his practice shows that we must learn to negotiate intense and radical contradictions in order to restructure our political reality. He insists on a political strategy that names specific individuals for their culpability in the deaths of others in ongoing colonial and frontier wars, while at the same time articulating the ways in which force, materials, and nonhuman actors diffuse and exacerbate these differential conditions. Weizman and his wide network of collaborators use counter-surveillance methods and the figure-ground relation as the beginning of a new topological articulation, linking cracks in architecture to geological fissures, within the field of immanent power.

After a series of advanced seminars at Duke University in mid-February 2013, and in the midst of his busy schedule, Eyal generously agreed to sit down with me to discuss his recent work on forensic architecture, international human rights law, and the relation of critical thinking and artistic practice to political interventions. A partial transcript of this conversation is included below.
How has your thinking and approach to the neocolonial occupation of Palestine by Israel changed over time? I am particularly interested in the movement of your thought from Hollow Land (2007) and its elaboration of the “political plastic” to your more recent development of forensic architecture in The Least of All Possible Evils (2011), Forensic Architecture (2012), and Mengele’s Skull (2012), where the subject as witness is being replaced and surpassed by an emergent forensic sensibility, an object-oriented juridical culture. How much of this movement is influenced by the changing situation itself?

Eyal Weizman

I think the latter works are to a certain extent a set of methodological reflections on Hollow Land. I had to find the language to understand—and it took some time and effort—in what ways materiality and territoriosity participate in shaping conflict, rather than simply being shaped by it. Hollow Land was already structured around various material things at different scales, so the logic of a kind of forensic investigation was essential. I guess I was personally attracted to the investigative intensity in forensics, less to the legal context in which its findings are presented, which are oftentimes, especially in an international legal context, quite skewed, as I showed in the latest books. And yes, the shift from Hollow Land to The Least of All Possible Evils also marks a shift in my attention from the West Bank to Gaza. This has obviously been shaped by events. In Gaza, one can notice a system of rule that is based more on humanitarian violence through the modulation of supply, the application of standards of the humanitarian minimum, and the seeming conduct of war by human rights (HR) and international humanitarian law (IHL) principles. So some of the attention shifted from territoriality to principles of “humanitarian” government. Although, of course, materiality entered in a different way—I tried to show how it interacts with law through forensics.

In any case, the investigation that culminated in my recent work started with a certain refusal of spatial research methodologies, commonly held at the time, derived mainly from certain readings of Henri Lefebvre. I thought they needed a more dynamic, elastic, topological, and force-field-oriented understanding of space, as well as an understanding of the immanent power of constant interaction between force and form. Across what I described as the “political plastic,” space is continuously in transformation. This was a politics of space, and here I mean material space as something that acts. War is a dynamic process of space-making. Frontier colonization is a slowed-down war, but still very elastic; the frontier is very different from a city like Paris, which has figured as the imaginary for a lot of spatial theory, and is often misplaced and applied to the frontier. Paris is a planned city, a very hard city, and its hardness has haunted the imagination of some spatial scholars studying very different things today. I thought we had to get rid of Paris to liberate Palestine. And then I kept pushing toward the idea of immanent materiality on different scales—not only on the scale of the territory, but on a micro-scale, through the details and substances—water, fields, forests, hills, valleys—which all play a role in shaping conflicts, and therefore have an effect on the forensic imagination.

So, to refer to an idea you brought up in an earlier conversation, the idea of elasticity, or what you called plasticity—ending at a moment of a bomb blast—I would say that I think that a blast is simply an acceleration of relations of force and form in the same way that wars in the city are an actualization of conflicts, and therefore have an effect on the forensic imagination.

So what you have called “the pyramids of Gaza” are just the sped-up force of the “natural” collapse of a building?

Eyal Weizman

The collapse of a refugee house is the making of the pyramids of Gaza. There are many pyramids throughout the strip, mainly in the camps and neighbourhoods that ring Gaza City and along the short border to Egypt.
A particular irregularity could be the re-... Calculations — Eyal Weizman...
A strike near Wana, capital of South Waziristan, close to the Afghan border. Pakistan media reports up to four unnamed deaths, and more injured. The first strike in Pakistan in 36 days. A military intelligence official told *The Long War Journal* that “it certainly wasn’t due to a lack of targets. Pakistan is a target-rich environment. We’re only scratching at the surface, hitting them in the tribal areas, while the country remains infested with al Qaeda and their allies.”

The Long War Journal

29 NOV 2012

Shin Warsak, South Waziristan, Pakistan

The artist Adam Harvey has developed what he calls “Stealth Wear”: he mani-
3–4 killed by a drone strike in a village north of Muran Shah, 10km from the Afghan border. Reuters reports that one of the casualties was Mohammed Ahmed Almansoor, a midlevel al Qaeda commander. The Pakistani Express Tribune reported that the three others were members of his family.

Location: Tabbi, North Waziristan, Pakistan

The “left-to-die boat” that Charles, Lorenzo, and Situ have been mapping and writing about has become an issue within IHL because, to a certain extent, it is the first time the trace of a boat on water has been mapped. Things moving in water usually leave no trace. The team discovered GPS coordinates by tracing phone calls and then worked with an oceanographic institute to re-create the drift pattern of the Mediterranean. The migrants on board were drifting in one of the most cluttered parts of the Mediterranean, in the middle of a siege with a lot of military and NATO vessels—and nobody intervened. So their idea was to reverse the regime of surveillance: if Western states claim this is the most surveyed sea in the world, they also have the responsibility to protect those people who drowned. According to international laws of high seas, if you hear an SOS call you must intervene. So, there is a series of legal challenges now based on the very unique ability to trace the movement of the boat in the sea.

This research represents an important and paradigmatic moment in the forensic architecture project that I run with a great team of artists, architects, and filmmakers—including Susan Schuppli and Thomas Keenan—in which various fellows, students, and artists work together.
13 APR 2013

4–6 killed. Tribesmen reported as many of six drones circling the area during the afternoon “spreading panic among the residents”. One drone fired two missiles around sunset, hitting a house. The bodies were too burned to be identified.

Location: Pakistan

We felt confident in our ability to detect, unveil, and analyze instances where power is camouflaged as benevolence. Not only in the fields in which we investigated war crimes, but in the operation of the forums that administered this evidence and arbitrated on the basis of it. We have no illusions about the forums: we know they internalize the power field external to them, and that they are skewed towards the powerful. We have no illusions about the politics of international humanitarian law. We know that human rights forensics can become an extension of western surveillance practices. We have seen the way in which the HR and the legal process can be abused by states to amplify violence. We assumed, however, that the only way to conduct critical research in the world today is in close proximity to, and even complicity with, the subjects of our investigation. Like the traditional Opera­¬ist motto, we wanted to act inside and against!

HD There seems to be a tension in your work between wanting to mobilize investigative journalism to denounce individuals publicly, as in the case of the Guatemalan genocide when you listed the accused (José Efraín Ríos Montt, Héctor Mario López Fuentes, Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores, and José Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez), but also to articulate the diffused networks of responsibility, across human and nonhuman actors, through forensic architecture. When thinking about whether you are going to take one tactic or another, is it just a question of the particular forum in which you are presenting?

EW This issue has already erupted in the context of my previous work on critical theory in the military. In 2008, one of the military commanders I was writing about hired one of the largest legal firms in Israel to threaten me and my publishers in Israel for libel. The accusations were frankly ridiculous and concerned with technical matters.7 I had research to support my allegations, but the real aim, I think, was to scare me and my peers from further publishing critical material that involved such detailed analyses of the military that named names and suggested personal responsibility and even liability. What this suit did was to remind us in the anti-colonial Israeli left of the power of this type of investigation. Indeed, within the controversy that ensued, one of the things that was brought to the forefront was our tendency to generalize and concentrate analysis on depersonalized large systems—the military, the state, etc.—rather than concentrating our attention on the role that certain characters might have within these systems. It is exactly this interaction between larger forces and individual intention that is necessary
to examine. We thought that we needed to have two maps at the same time, so it becomes a point of view simultaneously in one’s text; a theoretical one and a journalistic one, with the latter ferociously investigating certain issues and then placing them within a large theoretical frame of the former. But we did not have the legal knowledge of the money to defend ourselves (even against the most spurious of libel claims), for the journalistic machine to work.

So this connects to your question about forensics and the relation between the individual and larger, shaping forces. Human rights have what we call a figure-ground problem. On the one hand, human rights discourse operates very much through a process of foregrounding individual victims and perpetrators. It is a conception that is based on a single human figure who is tortured or killed, repressed by an authoritarian regime. This is a process of figuration, the extraction of a figure from a political background. The individual is the subject of human rights analysis and her or his testimony is the way of getting into the logic of the event. Retribution is too often seen as the punishment of individual perpetrators, rather than as the dismantling of all structural shaping forces within which injustice is perpetuated. This is figuration. An individual is extracted from a political field and history narrated as a crime—as if it were a “simple” criminal case.

However, war crimes investigations call for a more complex analysis than those in the context of domestic criminal law. War crimes, like other wartime events, are produced by a multiplicity of agents woven together by networks that further distribute action and responsibility, using technologies that now increasingly have semi-autonomous decision-making capacities. For example, missiles are themselves diffused bodies that are, in turn, governed by political, institutional, and administrative logics.

On the other hand, current human rights techniques have shifted attention to the ground. For example, Laura Kurgan so beautifully shows in her new book, has become a relatively recent tool for HR investigators. In satellite imagery, we no longer see figures. What becomes visible in these images is the background to human action—the land, the landscape, the built fabric, the destroyed buildings, the burnt fields, deforestation, flooding, etc. Instead of the figure, we have the ground that stands for the condition of the human. This challenges an important principle within HR work, which is traditionally about the human (state of the individual) by the human (testimony). Given that viewing is now not only undertaken but also interpreted by algorithms, it is no longer strictly by the human. So, by inverting figure and ground in this gestalt, we have turned the ground into the object of study. We have “figured” the ground.

In our analysis of Operation Sofia—what is called the “last Indian massacre”—during the Guatemalan Civil war in the early 1980s, our team (including Situ Studio, Paulo Tavares, Daniel Pasqual, and myself) has sought to extend the understanding of genocide by shifting our attention to the ground condition, using maps and remote sensing of the region. We are trying to produce maps of the processes of large-scale deforestation, of road-building, and concentration-towns, of destruction of the villages of the native Ixil people, of fencing and “privatizing” their mode of cultivation in fields that were common property, to account for the changing of plant species, especially maize, that led to the massive destruction of this protected group and their way of life. We seek to account for the organization of people and material that has resulted in the destruction of the conditions that would sustain life. Indirect killing, which occurs more slowly and not by direct trauma such as bullet holes or machete wounds, challenges traditional forensic work.

This is what we call field causality, which is tied to debates around the entanglement of politics and the environment. Unlike the direct linear causality of criminal law, field causality does not seek to connect a chain of events. Instead, causes are understood as diffused aggregates that act simultaneously in all directions. They are shaping forces and they affect the formation of larger territories and larger political events. In other words, rather than looking simply at new relationships between figure and ground, to find ways of understanding and illustrating rapid shifts in scale and the importance of events.

In the case of Guatemala, as in previous work on Palestine, this brings in all kinds of different actors—architects, road builders, agriculturnists, farmers, bankers—who are all a part of a much more diffuse responsibility that must be addressed in a fashion outside of the usual legal system. Indirect, aggregate, or field causality seeks to undo another important distinction between different kinds of values we attach to death. There were people that were killed in the war, but there were also people that died. To die, in this discourse, implies a secondary, non-intentional death. Recently, more work has been undertaken by epidemiologists in relation to non-direct mortality in wars. There was even an attempt by the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, to include indirect mortality figures in his controversial charging of the president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir, with genocide in Darfur.

It is an incredibly poignant argument to say that genocide is not just the barrell of a gun, but that it involves, instead, a network of diffused responsibility; still, aren’t there only a few legal venues to enforce these arguments? It makes me wonder what avenues for redress there could be.

I agree. Moreno-Ocampo faced huge criticism for his decision to do that, as well as accusations of “inflating numbers” in the context of a very politicized campaign against Sudan. And I partially agree, but I think that this is the frontier of conflict investigation, and the consequences of such development could be felt in different forums, as you say, not only in legal ones. Field causality has a very different implication than direct causes for the way the forums have been made. Indeed, field causality would be the bastion’s best defence in court. It would be what every perpetrator would like to claim in order to avoid conviction, and is therefore not enough as a single line or argumentation; we need to learn how to link singularities to structural conditions. However, it is very important to insist on this because field causality describes a political diagram that must be dismantled, and not just by courts. It does not necessarily imply a judgment, but rather a more radical action in changing the political force field.

Have the kinds of arguments developed through forensic architecture been used outside of the context of recent genocides and IHL? This kind of analysis, for example, is part of the politization of the ongoing genocide of indigenous people in North America—how governments and industry force people into settlements, the ongoing contamination of lands, and the hazardous exploitation of resources through mining practices, etc. Has the project of FA been advanced in these situations?

The senior person on our project, Susan Schuppli, is a Canadian theorist and artist, and she is looking at new claims brought up by indigenous communities in northern Canada and the new forums that have emerged to deal with these issues. She is also helping convene a group of M.A. members at our Centre who are working with the American NGO, Three Degrees Warmer, on a case brought by the Native Village of Kivalina, Alaska against Exxon Mobil Corp. These are, strictly speaking, outside of the legal frames of human rights and international humanitarian law, but as other members in our research groups have shown, and as I briefly alluded above, environmental issues are increasingly resembling states of conflict. And, environmental law increasingly resembles the laws of war.

In the Least of All Possible Evils, you explain that part of the justification for...
the use of drones is their “emotionlessness”; as Ronald Arkin, an American scientist and a leader in the field of weaponized robotics explained, robots have no joy in violence. It seems to me that part of the ongoing justification for extra-judicial killings by states rests not only on processes of rationalization, but also the diminishment of excess. There is, then, the fantasy of the elimination with in forensic architecture, as in any environment, are inherently excessive, they spill over their boundaries and defy easy classification. How does your work negotiate these two different ways of dealing with excess?

Yes, in The Least of All possible Evils, the argument is that dealing with the excesses of war, rather than its more structural political causes, could be abused by militaries and states. The calculated conception of violence it puts forth can justify almost any atrocity. In this way the logic of the “least of all possible evils” is invoked to justify the use of a lesser violence to prevent the excesses you mentioned. This is the principle of proportionality, which is about the “too much” of war, without ever saying how much is too much. So, the argument conjures a cold calculus, a kind of economy of ethics where good and evil are traded like commodities, and speculated on in the financial economy. But economies are dangerous and volatile, as we have seen again recently. So, proportionality always has a relation to the disproportional, or the excess you mentioned. Violence beyond reason, beyond calculation, the war of the mad, like the one Israel declared when it said that they were going to apply disproportional violence to Lebanon. In other words, they were going to break the law to maintain it. But disproportional violence is also the violence of the weak, those who cannot calculate, or wish not to, and those who are kept outside the economy of calculations. This violence is disproportional because it cannot be measured or calculated, and because, ultimately, when justice is not answered by the law, violence will continuously seek to altogether restructure the basis of law.

Endnotes


4 For a full list of DAAR projects, as well as theoretical reflections on those projects, see http://www.decolonizing.ps/site.

5 This project can be found at http://ahprojects.com/projects/stealth-weapons.

6 “In the case of what is now referred to as the ‘left-to-die boat’,” 72 migrants fleeing Tripoli by boat on the early morning of 27 March 2011 ran out of fuel and were left to drift for 14 days until they landed back on the Libyan coast. With no water or food on-board, only nine of the migrants survived. In several interviews, these survivors recounted the various points of contact they had with the external world during this ordeal. This included describing the aircraft that flew over them, the distress calls they sent out via satellite telephone and their visual sightings of a military helicopter which provided a few packets of biscuits and bottles of water, and a military ship which failed to provide any assistance whatsoever.” For their complete analysis, see Forensic Oceanography, http://www.forensic-architecture.org/investigations/forensic-oceanography.
