Media Aesthetics of Collaborative Witnessing


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I Site-Specific Casuistry

The exhibition ‘Three Doors – Forensic Architecture / Forensis, Initiative 19. Februar Hanau, Initiative Gedenken an Oury Jalloh’ at Frankfurter Kunstverein builds on a series of site-specific references. Upon entry to the space, site-specificity is clearly in evidence in an appeal to remember the innocent victims of two crimes: the terrorist attack in Hanau, Germany, in 2020, as well as the death of Oury Jalloh in Dessau in 2005. Next to a wall displaying the names of the victims, the video Invit zooms in on a map of the Federal Republic of Germany, to the State of Hessen, and to the crime scenes in the city of Hanau, about half-an-hour’s drive from Frankfurt. There, the 43-year-old perpetrator shot and killed nine people on the evening of 19 February 2020: Gökhan Gültekin, Sedat Gürbüz, Said Nesar Hashemi, Mercedes Kierpacz, Hamza Kurtović, Vili Viorel Păun, Fatih Saraçoğlu, Ferhat Unvar and Kaloyan Velkov. Six others were injured. The perpetrator acted upon far-right extremist and racist motives. In Invitation, the course of the crime is shown with the help of animated maps depicting the Kiosk in Hanau-Kesselstadt, the Arena Bar, and the house of the perpetrator, where he later killed himself as well as his own mother.

Zooming out, Frankfurt is also the city where the Initiative in Gedenken an Oury Jalloh commissioned a self-financed private autopsy of Oury Jalloh’s body, three months after he was probably burned to death in a prison cell at the Dessau police station in Saxony-Anhalt on

1 The Curatorial Host for the exhibition was Franziska Nori
2 Credit: Initiative 19. Februar Hanau
7 January 2005. This is just one of the many efforts of this self-organised initiative, which in the seventeen years since the crime has been working to clarify the case and commemorate it under the motto ‘Break the Silence’. Oury Jalloh had been arrested by the police, was shackled and then taken to a cell where a fire broke out at noon. When the residue of a cigarette lighter turned up belatedly, the police refused to investigate the case within their own ranks and claimed that the asylum seeker had started the fire himself.

The site-specificity of the exhibition goes beyond the cases presented. It is also institutionally site-specific in relation to the Hessian Office for the Protection of the Constitution and its agent Andreas Temme, whose probable involvement with a series of murders connected to the neo-Nazi network National Socialist Underground (NSU) was disclosed in Forensic Architecture’s widely acclaimed investigation The Murder of Halit Yozgat – an incident in Kassel in 2006, which Forensic Architecture published in 2017 at documenta 14.

Building on the investigations into the NSU complex, the three new investigations by Forensic Architecture (a research agency based in London) and its new sister organisation Forensis (based in Berlin) presented at Frankfurter Kunstverein are concerned with structural/institutional racism and right-wing terror in Germany. The investigations DOOR I, DOOR II and DOOR III expose the failure of police work through the architectural element of the door: would Said Nesar Hashemi and Hamza
Kurtović have survived the attacks in the Arena Bar in Hanau if the emergency exit door had not been locked? Why did the perpetrator’s front door remain untouched for several hours, allowing him to kill both himself and his mother, even though the police were nearby? And why do the smoke marks on the prison door behind which Oury Jalloh burned to death indicate that the door was open during the fire? Such questions are addressed in the applied forensic research.

Coming back to Frankfurt reminds of Forensic Architecture’s relationship to the city’s art institutions, as ten years prior to ‘Three Doors’, ‘Mengele’s Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics’ (at Portikus, Frankfurt, 2012)³ was the first major exhibition to propose ‘forensic aesthetics’, a methodology and style that has now become well established, by Forensic Architecture and other actors, with its combining of open-source intelligence and post-cinematographic strategies. ‘Three Doors’ is a novelty insofar as the commissioning and affected parties appear to be in equal authorship, as is reflected in the naming of the two initiatives in the exhibition title: ‘Initiative 19. Februar Hanau’ and ‘Initiative in Gedenken an Oury Jalloh’. The role of Frankfurter Kunstverein as an engaged cultural institution makes the exhibition a memorial site and a social-political platform, which is symptomatic for shifted attention economies relating to the various legal, political, civic-social, memorial and media forums. We will address these shifts in the remaining two observational takes on the exhibition.

II From Cross-Referencing to Collaborative Witnessing

This section focuses on the joint investigative work by Forensic Architecture / Forensis and the Initiative 19. Februar Hanau installed on the first floor of the Kunstverein in the room to the left. Putting the methods of Forensic Architecture and the inquiries into the pressing questions of the affected parties and relatives of the victims of the Hanau attack in dialogue, their respective media practices form a network of mutual authentifications, evidence and witness testimonies that are subtly woven together. This rather new approach extends the forensic cross-referencing known from Forensic Architecture’s videos. As a curatorial effect, this momentum goes beyond the individual exhibits and creates a media-aesthetic of a multidirectional spatial situation. We understand this situation as a new mode of collaborative witnessing. The historian Annette Wieviorka refers to the twentieth century as the ‘era of the witness’, which, according to Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, was replaced in the 1980s by a forensic era.⁴ As Keenan and Weizman state, the ‘forensic gaze’ now rather mistrusts the vocal testimony of persons and is directed towards material entities instead, enacting a ‘trial of the bones’.⁵ As an alternative to such a linear narrative, the works presented in the respective space entangle heterogeneous forms of contemporary media witnessing.

³ The exhibition, curated by Anselm Franke, built on the insights of the eponymous book by Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, Mengele’s Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics (Sternberg Press / Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2012) and contained installations by Hito Steyerl
⁴ See Keenan and Weizman, op cit
⁵ Ibid, p 25
In digital media cultures, testimony is not only created in media, but shaped by media as well, since the proliferation of smartphone cameras allows for other modes of documentation and sharing, of perceived live-ness and being-with. In this situation, the appearance of personal witnesses, media technology and the logics of networked media such as circulation, commenting and affect economies cannot easily be separated. Against this backdrop, the media-savvy practice of the Hanau attack’s affected parties and the relatives of the victims deserves further attention beyond the forensic mode ‘after’ the era of the witness. It is therefore worth describing the elements that come together in the constellation:

(I) On the main wall, the mural A Timeline of Collective Action categorises events to situate the testimonies spatiotemporally. It maps the past two years of the initiative’s activities and struggles, as well as the reactions and consequences. Civil society activities form the core path of this diagram. Starting from founding moments, campaigns, vigils and petitions, it branches off to the other arenas in which the attacks were dealt with in different ways. Thereby the diagram visually expresses the notion of the forum that is central to Forensic Architecture’s practice: it is a contested arena with

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8 Credit: Forensic Architecture / Forensis
varying thresholds of access – whether in the courtroom, the exhibition space, the parliament, or in media coverage. As a site of public evidence, it must be designed according to the requirements of a specific case. The diagrammatic cartography points to the synchronicity of actions in legal, political, civic-social, memorial and media forums, involving (i) the constant work of relatives and friends of the victims and civil society solidarity organisations; (ii) practices of jurisdiction, such as criminal charges and service complaints; (iii) political negotiations, such as the establishment of an investigative committee, which the Hessian parliament did not agree to until July 2021, a year and a half after the attack; (iv) media coverage; and (v) different remembrance practices, including monthly memorials. It highlights the fact that the initiatives carry out investigations in both a complementary and an oppositional manner to the state institutions, which may result in a profound knowledge of the structure of German political and juridical authorities and a certain legal expertise. Furthermore, the diagram locates the collaboration between the initiatives, the agencies Forensic Architecture / Forensis and Frankfurter Kunstverein. The timeline culminates in the opening of the exhibition ‘Three Doors’, which in this representation becomes a hub of diverse forensic actions.

(II) The video installation Testimonies of Relatives and Survivors About the Night of the Crime in Hanau and its Consequences consists of ten vertically installed screens. Facing the viewers at eye level, the survivors and relatives of the victims introduce themselves. The statements stem from the realm of the family: mother, father, brother, cousin and survivor. This has to do with the fact that the testimonies are reenactments of the family members’ and survivor’s statements given in the State Parliament of Hesse: ‘[T]he relatives were the first to be heard – unprecedented in the history of investigative committees.’ As questions remain unanswered and legal consequences are still being demanded, other forums, such as the exhibition itself, have to be consulted and established.

In the exhibition format, instead of presenting traumatic testimonies, media-savvy witnesses share their accounts. These oscillate between poetic wordings with phrases such as ‘the sun has cried, the earth has cried, because my child was innocent’ by Emiş Gürbüz, mother of Sedat Gürbüz, and sober descriptions of the psycho-social consequences on the affected communities. Survivor Piter Minnemann reports how the Hessian police asked him to walk three kilometres to the nearest police station after the attack. At that point, the perpetrator had not yet been caught. Minnemann looks into the camera and addresses the audience: ‘Now I ask: How should I feel in such a situation, if not even the police can handle it? Do you know what it’s like not to be taken seriously by the police?’ Back-to-back with Minnemann’s message, Emiş Gürbüz looks into the camera. Her contribution is dedicated to the lack of recognition by German society of migrant life and the so-called ‘guest worker’ generation, stating that xenophobia is deeply rooted in the social structures: ‘I accuse them all of helping to fuel this hostility and racism.’ Filmed at the premises of the social centre of Initiative 19. Februar Hanau, portraits of the nine victims can be seen in the blurred backdrop; furthermore,

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9 Credit: Initiative 19. Februar Hanau
Emiş Gürbüz has pinned a photograph of her son to her blouse. To give another example: Etris Hashemi, survivor and brother of Said Nesar Hashemi, describes how the relatives turned to Forensic Architecture. Quoting passages from the agency’s forensic report, he leads the audience through the report and towards the diagrams depicting the walkways of the people in the Arena Bar: ‘This is where it gets interesting, on page 14, point 5.2.’ Through his situated speaking, his voice, accent and reading, Hashemi appropriates the cool and matter-of-fact language of the report. But instead of adopting the agency’s style, his statement transforms the data reconstruction into a confident account of his own memory.

(III) The video triptych *Simply Silent: The Emergency Call Disaster of Hanau* uses 3D-cartography and footage from German television. It reconstructs the killing of Vili Viorel Păun, who, after having heard the shootings, followed the perpetrator in his car. In a remarkable act of civil courage, Păun tried to stop the murderer and at the same time attempted to reach out to the police. He dialled the number several times, but the Hanau emergency call centre was understaffed and the emergency hotline failed. As a visual encounter between the different exhibition participants and their use of media, the installation mixes forensic and essayistic approaches to video with classic documentary procedures. On a first glance, one could confuse this video triptych with an investigation by Forensic Architecture, due to the use of cartographic zooms, timelines and movements of a virtual camera, typical aesthetic strategies in their videos or in other recent open-source investigations carried out by Bellingcat, *The New York Times, The Washington Post*, and many other media outlets. Therefore, we see *Simply Silent* as a ‘visual bond’ (in the sense of Dziga Vertov) between civil society initiatives and Forensic Architecture and as a transdisciplinary approach. It is an example for the agency’s agenda to make forensic methods and tools publicly available. By appropriating these tools and methods according to its own need, the Initiative 19. Februar Hanau once again demonstrates its equal status as media-savvy witness.

III Renewal of an Operational Notion of Architecture and New Publicities

The exhibition presents three forensic investigations that deal with doors as instrumental mechanisms:

In *DOOR I: Racist Terror Attack in Hanau: The Arena Bar*, the emergency exit of the bar had been locked, so those inside could not flee the attack.

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11 Credit: Initiative 19. Februar Hanau
13 Credit: Forensic Architecture / Forensis
In **DOOR II: Racist Terror Attack in Hanau: The Perpetrator’s House**, the door of the perpetrator’s house remained unattended by the police, so the murders were able to continue.

In **DOOR III: Oury Jalloh’s Cell: Smoke Traces**, the door embodies a disciplinary power disposition.

With the door, which is both a carrier of material traces and a figure of Western operative architectural logics, Forensic Architecture takes up a classic, architecture-related perspective, which it has expanded extensively in recent years. Founded as a research agency in 2010 at Goldsmiths, University of London, and hosted by the Department of Research Architecture, the built environment has epistemologically served as the initial medium of material testimony for the investigations. Since then, the agency has widened its methods to investigate human and environmental rights violations as well as war crimes, through architectural media, deep mapping, video-based research methods and forensic oceanography, amongst others. In the exhibition

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14 Credit: Forensic Architecture / Forensis  
15 Credit: Forensic Architecture / Forensis and Initiative in Gedenken an Oury Jalloh  
16 As an architectural element, the door processes structural distinctions between inside and outside, open and closed. This operational perspective is developed in media theory and research on cultural techniques: ‘Doors are operators of symbolic, epistemic, and social processes that, with help from the difference between inside and outside, generate spheres of law, secrecy, and privacy and thereby articulate space in such a way that it becomes a carrier of cultural codes.’ (Bernhard Siegert, ‘Doors: On the Materiality of the Symbolic’, in *Grey Room* 47, 2012, pp 6–23, p 8)
‘Three Doors’, however, it is noticeable that the agency reactivates the reference to architectural forensics practised by building surveyors. This becomes clear not least in the presentation of the fire assessment in the case of the death of Oury Jalloh. Thus, the operational understanding of space presented is unlike Forensic Architecture’s work with an extended understanding of architecture, including ruins and digital remains, pulverised and destroyed architecture (as in their *Cloud Studies*), software architecture, or media infrastructure. Furthermore, as a means of entry, exit and confinement, the door stands in contrast to the warfare tactic of ‘un-walling the wall’,17 where every wall can become a door opening.

The methodologies applied in the cases *DOOR I–III* feature similarities to those of the investigation *The Murder of Halit Yozgat* and its presentation in a gallery: the combination of cartographic murals with the reenactment of an event by digital/virtual architectural modelling, on the one hand, and the reenactment through forensic experts in a physical model and an accompanying video documentation, on the other. ‘Experience aesthetics’ (defined in addition to the reception and production aesthetics) seem relevant to comprehend the intended function of the physical installation of the architectural model of *Door III: Cell 5. Dessau Police Station*. Unlike the

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floor maps used in other exhibitions, this model does not, however, seem to succeed in allowing, for a visitor, for any spatial experience of the confinement of Oury Jalloh or for tracing the forensic inquiry, but acts, rather, as a display. Instead, a more pressing exhibit in the case of Oury Jalloh is a video installed next to the model, in which a member of the Initiative Gedenken an Oury Jalloh gives a thorough recount of the various steps the civic-social community has undertaken over seventeen years in the attempt to solve the crime.18

Thus, in all of the three cases of ‘Three Doors’, civil activism is not depicted as a value in itself or as a mere metaphor for political engagement. Aesthetics typically associated with a notion of democratic public assembly and street presence with accusatory and exclamatory phrases like ‘No more forgetting, no more concealment, no more fear!’,19 an announcement of a vigil with ten open questions to the investigative committee (available as a leaflet and attached to the gallery’s wall), or the depiction of the portraits of the nine victims in Hanau in the form of stencils (poster Wir trauern, motto ‘#saytheirmames’), remain case-based and are situated in the specific contexts. However, counter-narrative and counter-forensic engagements point out that these cases are not singular events but are entangled in structural problems, right-wing complexes and an ongoing struggle against xenophobia.

While the exhibition convincingly succeeds in showing this connection between the micro- and macropolitical order in the three new case studies, the last part of the exhibition, Postscript: Counter Forensics, falls short of this curatorial achievement. Reminiscent of a hastily assembled retrospective, a number of past investigations by Forensic Architecture are displayed. Text panels provide information about the agency’s vocabulary: Open Verification, Data Commons, Sensing Ecologies and Investigative Aesthetics. While the other rooms of the exhibition focused on the concrete activist content and the complaints and open questions, here the agency takes a space for self-promotion, which, in our opinion, given its current prominence at this time, was not necessary. Instead, it would have been more fruitful to, for example, further explain the methodology of ‘Situated Testimony’ that is presented in one of the investigations in Postscript. The corresponding video demonstrates this investigative procedure of interviewing and real-time modelling of scenes and environments in 3D-models of situations where violent events have taken place. In conversations with the victims of such violence – for example, with those who have experienced push-backs at the Turkish-Greek Border20 – the Forensic Architecture researchers try to reconstruct their memory through architectural software by placing building elements such as windows, walls and doors within the architectural model as they listen to the victims’ accounts. There, also, the notion of the architectural element that is so central to ‘Three Doors’ is opened up: what becomes depicted is not how they are installed and how they operate but how they inform

18 17 Years of Self-Organised Investigation into the Oury Jalloh Case, Mario Pfeifer, Forensic Architecture / Forensis, Left Side Media, Initiative in Gedenken an Oury Jalloh
19 Three Doors, exhibition booklet, op cit, p 31
processes of design and projection as collaborative practice. Bringing together ‘Situated Testimony’
and collaborative witnessing would, thus, have empowered the other exhibition sections that
demonstrate the strength of the hegemony-critical forensic practice: using media aesthetic strategies
to assemble shared agendas of relatives, researchers, tools, testimonies and sources tangible for the
visitors in Frankfurt.

Coming back to site-specificity, a striking detail lies in the view from the window of the
Kunstverein onto the old town of Frankfurt, which almost forms part of the video installation
Testimonies in the foreground and the diagrammatic Timeline map vis-à-vis the window. Both works
are the result of a forensic reconstruction. In very different ways, both express the nexus of
architecture, forensics and public memory. After all, what seems like historical architecture in the
so-called New Frankfurt Old Town (also known as the Dom-Römer Quarter), is a conservative
architectural restoration of what was destroyed during the Allied bombings in World War II.21
This once again epitomises the question: instead of leaning on the façades of reconstruction,
which ‘real’ spaces does the exhibition open up and how?

21 The architect and theoretician Stephan Trüby has published a critical account of the conservative, revisionist political forces that stand behind the
reconstruction of Frankfurt’s New Old Town; see Stephan Trüby, Rechte Räume: Politische Essays und Gespräche, Birkhäuser, Basel, 2020
In our opinion, one of the most powerful moments of ‘Three Doors’ lies in its update of forensic cross-referencing not of numerical data but of voices and their testimonial quality. This is obviously the case in the auditory documentary series *The Void of Hanau*, presented in the central exhibition space. And when in the room to the left, some witnesses in the installation *Testimonies* reappear in *Simply Silent* (such as Piter Minnemann or Nicolescu Păun, Vili Viorel’s father), and one hears Emily Dische-Becker in the other room commenting on the investigative videos of *DOOR I* and *DOOR II* and quotes from the research report, her voice and that of Etris Hashemi’s testimony mingle. Rather implicitly, these auditory events testify to a media aesthetics of collaborative witnessing that is a result of a multivocal and multimedial encounter.

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Lisa Stuckey is a researcher in contemporary arts, media and cultural studies. Her book *Forensische Verfahren in den zeitgenössischen Künsten: Forensic Architecture und andere Fallanalysen* (De Gruyter, 2022) is based on her doctoral thesis, for which she received the Austrian State Prize ‘Award of Excellence’. Currently she is a lecturer in cultural theory at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria. With her postdoctoral project ‘Curating Weak Law’ she has been a fellow at the Central Institute for Art History in Munich in 2022, and later in 2022 will be a visiting fellow at the Institute for Interdisciplinary Legal Studies at the University of Lucerne in Switzerland.

22 Credit: Dietrich Brants and Jan Tussing