

Forensis: Field and Forum of *The Long Duration of a Split Second*

After a few steps along the dark passage, I entered the exhibition area of *The Long Duration of a Split Second* by Forensic Architecture. The work has won the 2018 Turner Prize and was exhibited altogether with other three winners at Tate Britain. Although the sounds of gunfire and shouting heard in the hallway have foreshadowed a sense of chaos, I was still shocked by the video projected on the large screen when entering the room.



<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/visual-arts/turner-prize-shortlist-goes-to-the-movies/news-story/4e21e7bb8e17eabdbcbac25d71372628>

The 8-minute on-site video is recorded by Keren Manor, a civilian member of an activist organization. The sound of fierce gunshots runs through the whole series of clips, accompanied by the shouting of police and constant break of the recording. Along with shaken hand-held camera, the video brings out a turbulent and unsettling atmosphere of reality. A precise timescale to the second and occasional superimpositions of digital mapping indicate that the team has put the video under careful study.

**Dawn, 18 January 2017**  
Hundreds of Israeli policemen raid the Bedouin village of Umm al-Hiran in the Negev/Naqab in order to demolish several houses. During the raid, two people are killed: a Bedouin villager, Yakub Musa Abu al-Qi'an, and an Israeli police officer, Erez Levi. This raid is part of an Israeli state policy seeking the eviction of the village in order to make way for the construction of a Jewish suburb of Hiran. Keren Manor, a member of the activist documentary collective Activestills who is present on the ground, uses her Canon DSLR camera to record ninety-five videos. She sends us a number of these while still at the site. Despite being physically close to the incident Manor is unable to see what is taking place. However, her videos contain visual and audio information that we later use in our investigation.

The description hanging on the wall states that the video was shot in the conflict between Israeli police and Bedouin villagers during a demolition activity of local houses in the Negev/Naqab desert on January 18th, 2017. The riot caused the deaths of two people: an Israeli police officer, Erez Levi, and a

Bedouin villager, Yakub Musa Abu al-Qi'an. The Forensic Architecture team has used this video as a key reference during their investigation, combining the uncertainty of instant reality with a precise measurement.

After leaving the screening room, I felt a little overwhelmed by the large well-lit exhibition room with printed texts and monitors on the walls. The hall includes a major section named *Killing in Umm al-Hiran 18 January 2017* that investigates the incident, focusing on the death of al-Qi'an. The minor section *Traces of Bedouin Inhabitation* surveys the historical context behind the incident-- the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian disputation and fight over the site's ownership and residency right.



Photographed by the author,  
Dec 2018

The first printed text is a tweet by the Israeli police official account, claiming the incident was a “terror attack” by the dead Bedouin villager al-Qi’an, that he hit the police car driving a van on purpose and caused the deaths of the police and himself. However, the next printed news reports that the Israeli police had used violence during the same incident and wounded the Arab Party leader Ayman Odeh. The news suggests the involved police force was not as innocent as proclaimed. The following two tweets are from some Israeli politicians, accusing al-Qi’an as a murderer and threatening to retaliate.

Next to the printed tweets, there are three videos displaying the step-by-step investigation process of the Forensic Architecture, accompanied by the reactions from Israeli and Arab officials at each stage. First, the team synchronized two videos by the sound of four gunshots: the footage played in the screening room and an infrared aerial video released by the Israeli police. They found out that the police had already started shooting at al-Qi’an’s car before it accelerated and hit the police car, which contrasts with the police statement. A response tweet from the Israeli police is printed right next to the screen, asserting the investigation as “manipulative edit”, and al-Qi’an’s “intention to murder” was evident.

In the second video, the team used video evidence to prove the headlight of al-Qi’an’s car was full-beam on before it ran into the police car. Thus, the police lied about the reason firing at al-Qi’an is that they had predicted a pattern of terror attack from his turned-off headlight. The video is again immediately followed by responses from both the Arab and the Israeli politicians. The Arab Party leader Odeh requested the resignation of

the Israeli minister and the police chief. The Israeli side surrendered by calling the deaths of both al-Qi'an and Levi "difficult and regrettable" but later returned to their original theory of the terror attack.

In the third video, the team traveled to the site and conducted reenactments of the incident by driving the same van through the same route of the car crash. They applied digital mapping and 3D modeling on the aerial thermal video released by the police to get a more precise location, and discovered a 15-degree ramp on the route would cause a spontaneous acceleration of the van. During the simulation, they even proposed an assumption that the police shot at the unarmed al-Qi'an when he tried to get out of the van and ask for help. Then timely medical aid from a nearby ambulance was held for 30 minutes until he bled to death.

It took me more than two hours to walk through the walls, reading all the texts and watching the videos. I was slightly trembling when reading the team's final statement over the case, feeling not only physically tired, but also mentally exhausted for following the meticulous investigation and the hypocritical game of politics. The unjust result that no penalty was taken on the involved Israeli police force leaves a poignant closure of the team's months-long effort. As an audience, during the two-hour tour, I felt as if immersed in the investigation in southern Israel and became curious about the team.

The failure of this investigation to lead to the charging of the policemen involved was based upon the familiar argument of the 'split second': police claim they must make 'life and death' decisions without the luxury of time and as a matter of instinct. But instincts are culturally conditioned, and the victims of police violence in Israel are disproportionately Arab citizens (just as in the US they are disproportionately black). In regarding Arab or black bodies as a threat, the split second argument thus condenses the long-term history of marginalisation and separation.

Forensic Architecture is using the material prepared for this exhibition to assist the lawyers of the Police Brutality Project at The Public Committee Against Torture in filing an appeal against the closure of the investigation into the police involved, as well as opposing the terms of eviction of the villagers.

The final statement, photographed by the author, Dec 2018

“Forensic” in the team’s name comes from “Forensis” in Latin, which means “pertaining to the forum”. Eyal Weizman, the chief director of Forensic Architecture, defines the word from two aspects: fields and forum. Field is “the site of investigation” and forum is “the place where the results of an investigation are presented and contested.”

<sup>1</sup>In other words, “field” corresponds to the investigation of the case, while “forum” is the presentation of it. The exhibition *The Long Duration of a Split Second* serves as an example of Weizman’s definition -- investigation in the field of south Israel and presentation at Tate Britain.

The methodology used in the investigation combines traditional witness testimony and site re-enactment, up-to-date digital technology and social media. The process takes

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<sup>1</sup> Eyal Weizman, *Introduction: Forensis, Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Goldsmith: University of London, 2014), 9.

advantage of the diverse occupation of team members, including architects, archaeologists, filmmakers, journalists, lawyers and software designers. The team turned media artifacts into useful evidence<sup>2</sup>; moreover, the contaminated “material witness” uploaded to social media is compensated by the careful correction of re-enactment and digital technologies (such as digital mapping and 3D modeling). Weizman compares crime scene with a building with structural crack.<sup>3</sup> Each crack on the architecture is unique due to specific force from the environment; similarly, each incident is the result of complex political, economic, and social factors. In the court of human rights, both subjective testimony and objective material are essential evidence, which are included in the exhibition.

Evidence is defined as “information presented in testimony or in documents that is used to persuade the fact finder (judge or jury) to decide the case for one side or the other.”<sup>4</sup> According to Thomas Keenan, a Forensic Architecture member, evidence is not a matter of fact but is what to use to persuade. “A judge or a jury decides, or finds, or tries, those facts, in response to the evidence.”<sup>5</sup> The exhibition put audience on the very position of judge, attempting to persuade the audience the investigation authenticity and the final result, that is, the Israeli police force is responsible for the deaths of two people: both the Israeli officer and the Bedouin villager al-Qi’an . More importantly, the tragedy

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>4</sup> Office of the United States Attorneys, *Justice 101, Legal Terms Glossary, “evidence,”* <http://www.justice.gov/usao/justice101/glossary.html>

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Keenan, *Getting the Dead to Tell Me What Happened, Forensics: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Goldsmith: University of London, 2014), 45.

is rooted in the distrust and hostility cultivated by the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In addition to the meticulous field research, the team present the work through delicate staging of the forum. After the visit, I was preoccupied by a question: why didn't the team produce a documentary about the investigation? Without the limitation of exhibition space, a film will bring more audience and attention to the case. For instance, *Spotlight*, a film focusing on the investigation process of the church sexual harassment cases, has raised public awareness on the crimes, and gained the production team the Oscar Award. However, later I realized that it is the very spatial design of the show enables it to achieve the phenomenal impression. Compared with the other three Turner prize winners, which are all presented as films in the dark screening room, the *Long Duration* invites the audience to actively interact with the content. Audience need to walk around the large exhibition hall, constantly raising their head to read the texts printed on the wall and picking up the earphone to watch the videos. The well-lit room allows them to observe other audience's reaction during the visit. Overall, the staging of the forum encourages the audience to become more engaged in the investigation as if a judge in the courtroom.



<https://frieze.com/article/id-rather-lose-prizes-and-win-cases-interview-eyal-weizman-turner-prize-nominated-forensic>

At the end of the visit, I was struck by frustration and exhaustion when reading the epilogue on the wall. The staging of the show has transformed the epilogue into a confirmed final sentence of the case, that the justice and the truth was eclipsed by the power. The well-lit show ironically contrasts with the gruesome reality it reflects. A crack on the wall can be restored; but what can we do when the whole building is constructed on a sinking swamp? The incident has been investigated, yet it is difficult for the truth to be revealed, and justice delivered. The forum puts the case under spotlight and confronts visitors with the process of unpacking the complex reality.

The exhibition also raises debate about whether the work should be qualified as art prize winner. On the commentary wall in Tate Britain, there are several notes complaining that the work is not art.



comment wall in Tate Britain, photographed by the author, Dec 2018

On the other hand, during an interview, Christina Varvia, the deputy director of Forensic Architecture, said that winning the prize offers some political authorities an excuse to devalue the team's investigation, claiming it was fabricated by "unserious artist group".<sup>6</sup> It seems like the practicality of the investigation must contradict with the artistic aspect. The dilemma lies between its field and forum. The hardcore evidence proposed by the investigation appears too objective, however, in my opinion, the ingenious presentation of evidence and the emotion it aroused qualify the exhibition as an outstanding piece of art.

Thomas Keenan, a team member believes that human rights is based on the question of evidence, and human status can only be guaranteed by other human.

The discourse of human rights seems to turn fundamentally around this question of evidence—its discovery or its production, its presentation, and its

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/04/27/turner-prize-shifted-focus-onto-issues-forensic-architecture/>

reception... The human status appears to be rather uncertain, not secured by anything, subject to regular challenge and contest. It is not guaranteed by anything but other humans, and they are not good at guarantees.”<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of being criticized for “pretentious methodology and excessive evidence”, the team’s months-long investigation reflects their ardent pursuit of truth and justice. They are the among the few resistant guarantees of human status by fighting for the ignored, the destroyed, and the forgotten. Weizman responded winning the Turner Prize as a bittersweet reward, “I’d rather lose prizes and win cases”.<sup>8</sup> After all, it is the art world that needs more serious and even political artists like Forensic Architecture, not the other way around.

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Keenan, *Getting the Dead To Tell Me What Happened, Forensics: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Goldsmith: University of London, 2014), 42.

<sup>8</sup> <https://frieze.com/article/id-rather-lose-prizes-and-win-cases-interview-eyal-weizman-turner-prize-nominated-forensic>

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