RECLAIMING ALGORITHMIC MEDIA:
FORENSIC ARCHITECTURE AND MACHINE-ENABLED PUBLIC TRUTH

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This paper examines the critical appropriations and affordances of computer-generated images within the entangled realms of art, archive, and activism. Varied research and activist groups, such as Forensic Architecture and the Syrian Archive (in collaboration with Adam Harvey), use digitally rendered images for training computer vision. In this way, these agencies could search for evidence within large data sets of images that exposes the violent acts of militarized states. Contesting the ideals of omniscience that dominate today's information societies, their interventions demonstrate how data relations reproduce the regime of visuality that obscures and naturalizes the continuing imperial violence. As a result, they invert the forensic gaze of algorithms through a machine-enabled architectural mode of analysis and political commitment to "the right to look" in Nicholas Mirzoeff's terms. Accordingly, they succeed in reutilizing algorithmic aesthetics, even advanced game engines (e.g., Epic's Unreal Engine), which is often adopted by the military-entertainment complex, for restoring the public's relationship to truth and history regarding human rights violations and war crimes. First, I explore how machine (vision)-based applications extend human cognition across physical and social systems while relying on human labor and epistemes to function as such (Kronman, 2020). Second, I attend to the forms of presentation and the manners of reception of their critical investigations. For example, I will discuss Forensic Architecture's project Triple Chaser (2019), which evolved into a short film in partnership with Praxis Films (Laura Poitras). The investigation tracks tear gas illegally used against civilians in cities and at borders around the world. The intriguing characteristic of the project is not only their use of machine learning and synthetic images but also their strategic presence at the Whitney Biennial, which raised a lot of controversies around Warren Kanders' involvement with the institution. Kanders is the owner of one of the largest manufacturers of munitions, Safariland, and was the vice-chairman of the board of trustees at the Whitney Museum of American Modern Art (until he was forced to resign). Forensic Architecture's intervention both rendered the covert militarized operations visible and disrupts the imperial logic that governs cultural institutions and urban spaces alike. Ultimately, they shift our attention to monetary, symbolic, and legal systems through which affordances of algorithmic media come into being, with frictions that motivate and enable critical interventions as such.

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