

REVIEW: FAREWELL TO CRITICAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This review of Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman's provocative book *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflict and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (2021), tackles the ways in which the production of knowledge in contemporary societies increasingly intersects with the problem of aesthetics, and discusses this critical contribution to the constellation of art, facts, truth, and investigation.

Keywords: Aesthetics; Investigation; Activism; Forensic Architecture.



An accusation has always loomed over the work of Forensic Architecture that, while their investigations may rightfully appear in courts and official inquiries, they should not be presented in art contexts. This libel, in fact, shadowed their nomination to the 2018 Turner Prize. “It’s not art, we don’t consider ourselves artists,” replied the group founder Eyal Weizman, “I want to win cases — not prizes” (Bevan, 2018). But the recurrent charge has darker implications. In the 2017 Documenta, when the research agency displayed their findings that German authorities colluded with the killers of Halit Yozgat at a nearby internet café in Kassel, there was a concerted attempt to disqualify those revelations on the basis that, in the words of the ruling Christian Democratic Party, it was “art, not evidence”. As human rights and state crimes go through this jarring “but is it art?” moment, Eyal Weizman and Matthew Fuller, a Professor of Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths who also sits on the advisory board of Forensic Architecture, recently co-wrote the volume *Investigative Aesthetics. Conflict and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (2021), an essay which precisely sets out to address these contested debates over art, law, politics, ecology and media in the post-truth era. In a nutshell, the book vindicates aesthetics and investigation in the current political landscape, and it does so by emboldening their root words, respectively, “perception” and “vestige” — to which they have added a third one, no less important, the etymology of *forensic* as “forum”.

The three components run through the volume, reclaiming the mobilization of these related concepts as collective modes of knowing

and intervening in the present. But this is no instruction manual. It is a serious attempt to requalify what these terms mean today, and how they may be redeployed against the relativism and conspiracy of post-truthers, by taking the form of an investigative aesthetics that integrates multiple viewpoints, complex practices of truth, and collective and open forms of verification. The evident peril of such a book might then be, of course, the self-serving narrative, in the sense that their redefinition of what aesthetics and investigation is often amounts to a description of what Forensic Architecture does. And yet, in so many ways, this essay is an electrifying incitation that will surely jolt the arts and humanities, offering a whole new vocabulary with which to navigate the mediatised political spectacle today.

Instead of mired in the numbing, circular debates about the political efficacy of art — as T.J. Demos pointed out, to ask “whether or not art could be ‘effective’ on the level of national and international politics can only invite its own (often expected) negative response, bringing about a state of melancholy, disappointment, and resignation” (Demos, 2013, p. 91) — this is about direct action as research and learning, about acting collectively to make sense of the world, and about creating experimental workspaces to facilitate a public formation of truth. Marshaling a range of references as disparate as Isabelle Stengers, Kodwo Eshun, Carlo Ginzburg and Spinoza, calling up fellow travelers like Feral Atlas, Bellingcat or Invisible Institute, and shuttling from the attributions of old masters in museums to extended genealogies of hip-hop, from the torture prisons in Syria to the enduring patterns of slavery, from the philosophical concept of the commons to the idea of knowledge as pluriversal, every single page bristles with insight. True to their collaborative method, the writing itself makes unexpected connections out of a jumble of scattered material, breaking the silos of knowledge formation to put contrasting conceptions of aesthetics and investigation into play.

In the arts and humanities today, everyone has become somewhat proficient at knowing what images fail to do. But not so much in terms of what they actually do, what their actual affects and effects are. *Investigative Aesthetics* mounts a powerful argument in this regard, which might very well be the hoped-for breakthrough: a call to just move away from the critical theory paradigm of mistrusting representation and undermining truth claims, so as to embark on the so-called investigative mode — “The investigative mode’s commitment to establishing facts seems to push in the opposite direction to the critical mode’s suspicion of the authority of established truths.” (Fuller & Weizman, 2021, p. 107) The point is not so much to decode or unpack, but to re-assemble and to generate, not to take something apart and peel down its layers, but rather to make something totally different and activate it, so that the image becomes less of a ruin, more of a hinge. This opens up new, radical possibilities. A recurrent complaint of the translators of Jacques Rancière, and a source of many misunderstandings of his work, is that the word *sens* can both signify sensorial and meaning. The confusion that this has often generated in interpreting some of the concepts sits, ironically, at the heart of Fuller and Weizman’s expanded notion of the

aesthetic, which involves both sensing and sense-making. This means, in turn, that not only everything senses — and thus, it lies beyond individual human perception —, and that being attuned and making sense of all those perspectives and datasets is therefore not limited to the arts in any way, but requires disciplines — such as architecture, ecology, journalism, technology — to merge, contaminate, and mutate. It follows, then, that museums are considered to be among other fora of collective sense-making that include universities, courts, studios and laboratories, as sites for collective action and speculative engagement with the world. This is not merely a primer in actionable critical theory. Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman’s forceful argument that “truth and aesthetics need to find different modes of coexistence” (p. 18) is a badly-needed roadmap for experimental intervention, now hidden in plain sight, as the litany of laments over the demise of the arts and humanities piles up.

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