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## Spectral Violence: Art and disappearance in Post-Ayotzinapa Mexico<sup>2</sup>

*Violência Espectral: Arte e desaparecimento no México pós-Ayotzinapa*

### Abstract

In Mexico, memory has become a battlefield nowadays. The Ayotzinapa case (2014) –a still unresolved State-level human rights violation, including the disappearance of 43 students– transformed the public space into a permanent struggle between governmental amnesia and the politics of truth. With the emergence of various massive clandestine graves all across the country, a new form of violence emerged, characterized by the spectral materiality of the absent body. In this article, I elaborate on the relation between disappearance, social memory, and creative activism in recent Mexican art. Using the investigations of Forensic Architecture in Mexico as a case study, the text discusses the role of visual culture in the articulation of what I call the performativity of human rights.

### Keywords

Mexico, Contemporary Art, Ayotzinapa, Disappearance, Memory, Human Rights

### Resumo

*No México contemporâneo, a memória virou um campo de batalha. O caso Ayotzinapa (2014) –uma violação de direitos humanos orquestrada pelo Estado e ainda não resolvida, incluindo a situação de 43 estudantes ainda desaparecidos– transformou o espaço público em uma luta permanente entre a amnésia governamental e as políticas da verdade. O surgimento de fossas comuns clandestinas em todo o país propiciou também uma nova forma de violência caracterizada pela materialidade espectral do corpo ausente. O artigo pesquisa a relação entre desaparecimento, memória social e ativismo criativo na arte mexicana recente. Usando as investigações da Forensic Architecture no México como estudo de caso, vamos analisar o papel da cultura visual na articulação do que o autor descreve como a performatividade dos direitos humanos.*

### Palavras-chave

*México. Arte Contemporânea. Ayotzinapa. Desaparecimento. Memória. Direitos Humanos.*

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## I.

In 2017, the University Museum of Contemporary Art of Mexico (Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, MUAC) opened an exhibition entitled *Forensic Architecture: Towards an Investigative Aesthetics*. The show included a selection of already finished and still in progress investigations conducted by Forensic Architecture. This platform is a multidisciplinary agency founded in 2010 by British architect Eyal Weizman. As an affiliated project with Goldsmith, University of London, the goal of this researching agency is to investigate violations of human rights around the world. In addition to investigations conducted in countries such as Turkey, Russia, Guatemala, Germany, Pakistan, West Papua, Palestine, Syria, Israel or Indonesia, the exhibition included cases addressing the legal vacuum experienced by undocumented migrants stranded in the ocean. The show also included the results of their research in Mexico. Under the title *Mexico Investigation*, Forensic Architecture created for the occasion a mural-scale chart displaying information related to the Ayotzinapa Case, a State-level human rights violation occurred in 2014 in the Southern State of Guerrero, Mexico, including the disappearance of 43 students. [Fig. 1]

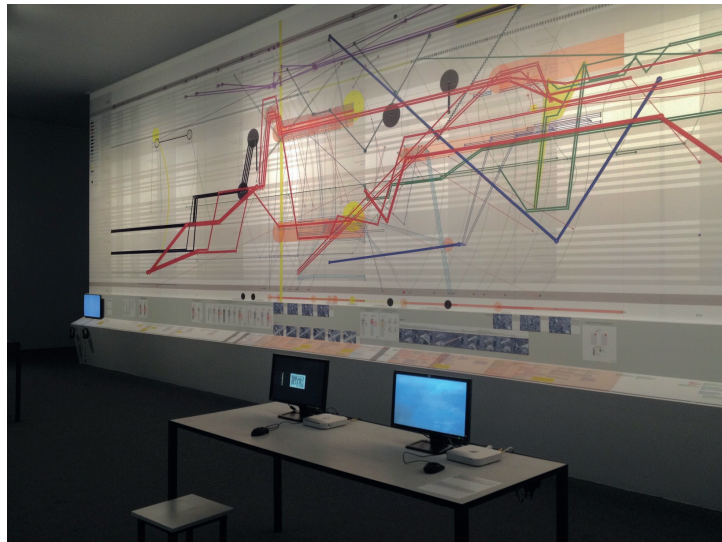


Figure 1: Forensic Architecture.  
*Mexico Investigation* (2017).  
Installation view.

Despite its short life, Forensic Architecture has been instrumental in judicial processes and political hearings concerning killings, armed conflicts, genocides, enforced disappearing, state terrorism, organised crimes, environmental disasters, and migratory crisis among other humanitarian issues. Some of their projects have been developed in coalition with the International Criminal Court and Amnesty International. Using database analysis, photogrammetry, 3D modelling,

and what they call counter-forensics, this agency provides verified information for the resolution of pressing issues in society today. In recognition to their dedication to human rights, Forensic Architecture has been nominated for various awards in fields such as environmentalism, journalism, architecture, design and technology. Interestingly, the agency has been celebrated as well as an artistic project and curatorial platform.

In 2018, Forensic Architecture was nominated for the Turner Prize, the prestigious visual arts British award conferred by the Tate Gallery. Such recognition makes clear that Forensic Architecture is largely perceived as an agency that is much more than a human rights advocate or a technology-based academic researching group. Nominations such as the Turner Prize revolve around the fact that this agency –involving architects, researchers, geographers, advocates, software designers, and journalists– actively collaborates with museums producing installations and exhibitions. Crossing disciplines, artistic media, audiences and legal/aesthetic discourses, their projects get rid of traditional conceptions of how artistic research should be performed and to what extent does the geopolitics of human rights relate to our everyday visual culture.

For Eyal Weizman, artistic and judicial institutions are both problematic but potentially useful. “[W]e can think of art institutions –he asserts– in a way analogous to courts. If the gallery is to a certain extent contaminated by its context, funding, and politics, so is the university and so are the courts and the institutions of law. From our perspective we must try to negotiate these problems, without adhering to a religion of the law or of art —that is, with recognition of the limits of each and being realistic about what is possible to achieve with each” (Bois, 2016: 133). Embracing the ‘exhibitionary complex’ but not having any specific artistic expectation, Forensic Architecture has developed what they call ‘investigative aesthetics’, an understanding of visual arts, filmmaking, and photography that goes beyond the production of compassion or empathy. The agency defines the term in the following way:

“[A]rtists have collaborated with human rights organizations since the birth of the human rights movement [...] Human Rights groups made good use of the affective power of the arts in helping stir public compassion, but it sometimes replaced historical and political investigation with accounts of individual tragedies. With several important exceptions, artists’ work was kept external to and merely illustrative of the actual investigative work. Forensic Architecture seeks to shift away from this use of the arts and to employ aesthetic sensibilities as investigative resources” (WEIZMAN, 2014: 12).

For them, investigating humanitarian issues demands the active participation of our senses. Instead of illustrating, denouncing or commenting the case from the outside, visual arts must be fully embedded in the very act of researching. "Achieving a heightened aesthetic state of material sensitivity, tuned to weak signals, must be enhanced by a sensitivity to the materiality of politics: this entails an appreciation that whether you are a building, a territory, a pixel or a person, to detect is to transform, and to be transformed is to feel pain" (Weizman, 2014: 30).

Sensing objects, experiencing architectures, and feeling evidence are, strictly speaking, investigative tools. The aesthetic materiality of the physical world intensifies our capacity to make sense –so to speak– of the cognitive, political or ethical dilemmas of our society. For Weizman, "Investigative aesthetics slows down time and intensifies sensibility to space, matter and image. It also seeks to devise new modes of narration in articulating new truth claims" (Weizman, 2017: 94). From this point of view, truth is not only grounded on aesthetics; it also demands the implication of the object/subject sensorium in order to accomplish its deep political goal as *res publica* [coisa do povo, coisa pública]. In fact, most of the projects developed by Forensic Architecture criticize the idea that we live in a post-truth or post-factual epoch, with no capacity to rise the architecture of our common political discourses on evidence and facts.



Figure 2: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Level of Confidence (2015). Installation view.

## II.

In many respects, the intertwining of aesthetics and research exercised by Forensic Architecture recalls the expression 'regimes of veridiction', the ethical conundrum of truth telling and truth seeing described by Michel Foucault in his lectures at the Collège de France (1982-83). Rather than an objective search for 'The Truth' with capitals, the games of veridiction –as sometimes Foucault calls them– circle around the performativity of evidence, stimulating our capacity to see, to recognize, to tell, and to convene truths. Expanding Foucault's lessons and redirecting Allan Sekula's understanding of photography as a counter-image or counter-testimony (Sekula, 2014), Eyal Weizman and Thomas Keenan have advanced a methodology they call counter-forensics.

Conceived as a tool of opposition and social struggle, counter-forensics is committed to give back the term 'forensics' its original meaning. As it is well known, 'forensic' derives from the Latin root *forensis*, 'pertaining to the public' or 'the locus of the assembly': the common place where ordinary people gather, talk, and conceive

policies. It also connects with forum, which means 'public place', 'out of doors', 'outside'. Contrary to popular belief and day-to-day usage, forensics is far from being a scientific knowledge not accessible to ordinary people. It might be rather described as a public forum: the common arena for sensing and embodying abstract political concepts such as 'justice', 'truth', 'freedom', 'humanity' or 'restitution'.

However, film industry, TV series, and Netflix-sized visual culture provide different understandings of the term. In the media, forensics is presented as a 'from up to down' institutional discourse, fully attached to State-level views on security, judicial order, institutional transparency, scientific biometrics, and surveillance technology among other forms of DNA-based biopolitical control. Generally speaking, people associate the term with state-of-the-art legal medicine, court jargon and scientific criminal investigations. Since 2005, crime-show-viewing habits and the so-called 'CSI effect' has gained presence in academia. The discussion addresses the following question: to what extent does the 'forensic turn' of media affect general legal perceptions of jurors and the everyday treatment of evidence in the courtroom? After decades of discussion, there is no clear answer to the problem. As Deborah Baskin and Ira Sommers have argued, "[t]he question of whether juror decisions regarding verdicts in criminal cases arise out of or in spite of the CSI Effect, or whether they bear any relationship to crime show viewing, remains elusive" (Baskin, 2010: 98).

What forensic aesthetics makes clear though, is that our social sensorium actively participates in the production of social memories, either to reject mass media mindsets such as the CSI effect or, as Allan Sekula sustains, to produce effective political counter-images. As Thomas Keenan has pointed out, "if forensics –in common parlance– refers both to the scientific investigation of physical and digital objects (including documents and photographs as well bodies, bones, bombs, bullets, and buildings) and to the presentation of those objects as evidence in legal proceedings, then counter-forensics refers to all sorts of efforts designed to frustrate or prevent in advance the analysis of those objects" (Keenan, 2014: 68).

Devoted to restore the etymological foundations of the term, Weizman argues that the power to build truths lies on the civil assembly and the public sensorium rather than on the optics of the State. As a disruptive practice facing what Foucault characterized as governmentality, counter-forensics inverts the relation between individuals and power. This means that the general public is in capacity to investigate governmental actions and State-level violations and crimes. As Weizman has pointed out, "[it] is a counter-hegemonic practice able to challenge and resist state and corporate violence and the tyranny of their truth" (Weizman, 2014: 12). In other words, counter-forensics returns power to the commons in order to make the State accountable for its actions. "[W]hile police forensics is a disciplinary project that affirms the power of states –Weizman asserts– the direction of the forensic gaze could also be [...] used instead to detect and interrupt state violations" (Weizman, 2014: 10).

### III.

Forensic Architecture: Towards an Investigative Aesthetics was conceived as a collection of worldwide counter-forensic case studies. Previously displayed at Macba (Contemporary Art Museum of Barcelona), the transatlantic itinerancy of the show added a new project called Mexico Investigation. The project combined official and independent investigations on the enforced disappearance of 43 students from a Rural Normal School [Raúl Isidro Burgos], located in the Mexican state of Guerrero, in a small community called Ayotzinapa.

For this project, Forensic Architecture collaborated with Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF), family members of the detained-disappeared students, and the Human Rights Center Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez (known as Centro ProDH), a local NGO founded in 1988. Considering the variety of actors involved, it is difficult to articulate in one lineal narrative all the details of the case. In a nutshell, the disappearing of the 43 students runs something like this: on the night



Figure 3: Ai Weiwei. LEGO Portraits-Ayotzinapa Case (2019). Installation view.

of 26-27 September 2014, a group of 80 students from the Rural School located in the Mexican state of Guerrero were intercepted during the preparatory actions for the so-called 'Dos de Octubre' [October the 2nd], a demonstration occurring every year on a fully politicized non-working day in which citizens and institutions commemorate the massacre of students occurred in Tlatelolco, Mexico City. In coordination with state agencies, federal police, the organized crime and the military, a group of municipal policemen attacked the students, killing two, causing permanent brain damage to one, and detaining and disappearing 43.

Immediately after, the Mexican State circulated an inconsistent explanation, incriminating a group of thugs called *Guerreos Unidos* (United Warriors) for the disappearing. Based on insufficient evidence, the Attorney General's Office (PGR) reported that members of the abovementioned group detained the students, torturing them and burning their bodies in a dump in Cocula, a small village located 150 miles from Ayotzinapa. Bombastically announced as the official 'historical truth'



by Jesús Murill Karam, the Federal General Attorney, the report was discarded and condemned in September 2015 by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI-Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes), a commission created on purpose by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Five years later, the 43 students remain disappeared and the Ayotzinapa Case continues to be an unresolved State-level crime. However, memory became afterwards a battlefield, transforming the public space into a permanent struggle between governmental amnesia and the politics of truth. The case also galvanized new forms of social claim, offering an important landmark for organizations of the civil society in their search for justice. Expressions such as 'It was the State', 'We had enough', or 'Appearance with life' made visible the lack of accountability, emphasizing the collusion of the State with the organized crime. Furthermore, it established a bridge between the 68 social movement, the victims of the 'dirty war' (1970s-1980s), the increased violence resulting from the War on Drugs declared in 2006 by former president Felipe Calderón, and the astonishing number of clandestine graves emerged in recent years.

Far from being an isolated case, Ayotzinapa deeply removed the somatic architecture of the social body in Mexico. It is not exaggerated to say that the current human rights agenda in Mexico –General Law of Victims, Truth Commissions, Special Office of the National Human Rights Commission for the investigation of Enforced Disappearance and State Violations, the Fundamental Agenda for Truth, Peace and Justice– finds in Ayotzinapa the most important point of inflection. Even the Special Office of the National Human Rights Commission for the Iguala Case, created in 2014 for the investigation of the enforced disappearance in Ayotzinapa, was escalated and revamped in 2020 as the General Office for the Investigation of Enforced Disappearance and State Violations in Mexico.

From then on, grassroots organizations and social movements led by victims' family members became unavoidable public voices. That was the case with Todos somos Ayotzinapa (We all are Ayotzinapa), Acción Global por Ayotzinapa (Global Action for Ayotzinapa) o Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity). The later, a massive 'indignados' movement initiated in 2011 by poet and activist Javier Sicilia, has been instrumental in denouncing the ontology of fear derived from the proliferation of clandestine graves. Evoking the circulation of images depicting exhumations, bones, and human remains in the media, Javier Sicilia has eloquently described the limits of language and the social trauma derived from massive enforced disappearance. "Weeks ago we received various pictures from Semefo (Forensic Medicine Service) [...] What you find in them defeats language", he asserts (Sicilia, 2016)

## IV.

Concerning the claim for justice in Mexico, it is interesting to notice how social movements address the general figure of the victim and that of the disappeared after Ayotzinapa. Though any form of enforced disappearance produces victims and involves some sort of violence, missing people is twofold victims –so to speak– in the sense that in lacking 'material presence', the disappeared strands in a juridical swamp like a ghost. Until exhumation and identification, victims are required to perform their absence in order to properly build the cases. As a result, the missing subject experiences a second level of violence once it becomes a legal phantasmagoria, potentially alive and dead at the same time.

Hito Steyerl recalls experimental physicist Erwin Schrödinger when she characterizes this state of indeterminacy as a quantic legal paradox.

"As long the victims weren't proven dead —as long as they were still missing— they were in a state of superposition and indeterminacy. While the crime was lingering, Schrödinger's box remained closed and both a potentially dead missing person and a potentially living missing person were entangled in a paradoxical legal quantum state". For Steyerl, "[t]his state of indeterminacy enabled the cases to remain open and investigations to proceed" (Steyerl, 2012: 142) Indeed, it is generally accepted that enforced disappearances are not subject to a statute of time-based limitations or amnesty. Even hundreds of years after, an enforced disappearance is still an open crime. However, missing people is easily thrown out into juridical oblivion, for the obvious reason that searching bodies demands not only time and energy; it also requires an important amount of economic, legal and technical resources. This explains why the social memory in Mexico is crowded with thousands of absent bodies, piled behind the iron curtain of impunity and the rampant lack of accountability.

Official numbers of missing bodies in the country are actually disturbing. In the last thirteen years (2006-2019), more than 3 thousand clandestine graves and about 5 thou-

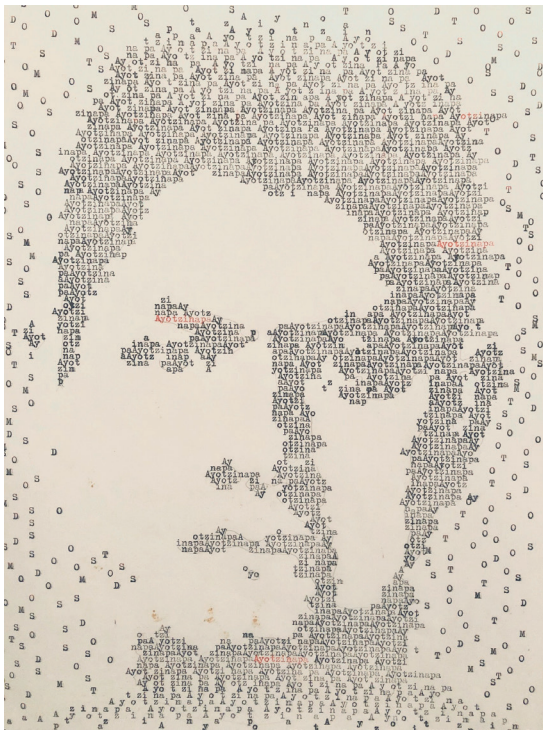


Figure 4: Javier del Olmo. 43 Students from Ayotzinapa (2014). Detail.

sand bodies have been found. Far from decreasing, rates have been growing exponentially in the last months. The latest official statement prepared by the National Human Rights Commission reports the finding of 671 skulls in a period of only 9 months (December 2018 - August 2019). This situation allows us to characterize the country as a national-scale graveyard. Even more so if we consider that Mexico has never had trustable records and statistics concerning enforced massive disappearances and systematic violence against civilians.



In 2015, the president of the National Human Rights Commission, Luis González Pérez, appeared in court in front of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED). At Geneva, he was asked to provide verified information concerning official numbers of disappeared people in Mexico. Instead of contrasted data, his report was a sort of confession: “[A]t this point –the Mexican commissioner asserted– we cannot provide clear and trustable statistics [...] we need first to establish a better articulation between Federal Government and local entities and to use an accurate methodology in order to verify data”.<sup>1</sup> And he was actually right. In Mexico, numbers of disappeared people have always been controversial and still are today. Official and non-official circulation of statistics concerning enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions have been systematically used as delusive rhetorical instruments, actively participating in the reproduction of governmental violence against civil society.

The unstable spectrum of appeared and disappeared people in Mexico has indeed a spectral dimension. When former president Enrique Peña Nieto was elected in December 2012, the ‘official’ number of disappearances was 26,121. As a consequence of what he called an ‘actualization’ of the National Records of Missing and Disappeared People, numbers changed only two months later, decreasing to 18,995, this means 7,000 less. In 2014, the number experienced a new and this time astonishing transformation, decreasing again from 18,995 to only 8,000.

Rates were so unreal, that all those numbers were rectified again six months later when the official statistic was established in 23,271. Following the 14 recommendations issued in 2015 after the Ayotzinapa Case by the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations, the Mexican Records of Missing and Disappeared People published in 2016 a new official number of disappearances, 29,917. Beyond volatility, it is important to notice that 30,000 disappearances is similar to the estimation of kidnappings during the Argentinean ‘dirty war’, provided by Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, and three times the number of disappearances officially accepted by Argentinean military representatives.

## V.

Thought this number was ratified by international organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, statistics in Mexico continue to be delusive today. In addition to the abovementioned inconsistencies, official reports seem to miss the point as they provide confusing definitions of the concept ‘enforced disappearance’. Geographical, criminal, and forensic references tend to be as well insufficient, turning data into an almost useless accumulation of equivocal numbers. The Special Report on Disappeared People and Clandestine Graves in Mexico, prepared in 2017 by the National Human Rights Commission, points directly to the problem in the following terms: “This institution expresses inconformity and dissatisfaction with the information provided at different moments by federal attorney offices in the country, as they use indistinctly ‘disappeared’, ‘lost’, ‘not located’ and ‘absent’ when referring to missing people, making difficult for this National Commission to provide information concerning events specifically related to criminal behaviour imputed to or perpetrated by State agents or individuals, and those events occurred in different circumstances”.<sup>2</sup>

1 - The report appears quoted here: <https://www.lapoliticaonline.com.mx/nota/81233-el-gobierno-reconocio-en-la-onu-sus-problemas-para-terminar-con-las-desapariciones-forzadas/> [consulted December 2019].

2- The report can be consulted here: [https://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/default/files/doc/Comunicados/2017/Com\\_2017\\_103.pdf](https://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/default/files/doc/Comunicados/2017/Com_2017_103.pdf) [visited December 2019]



Figure 5: Teresa Margolles. Embroidered fabric (2012). Installation view.

Considering the high level of impunity and the misleading use of juridical instruments for the protection and reparation of victims in Mexico, it is understandable that the vast majority of cases never reach the court as formal accusations and it is with no surprise that independent organizations consider the new official number an underestimation. For them, most institutions devoted to collect information operate de facto as an obstacle to this very goal. More often than expected, State-level officials participate in the destruction of incriminating evidence, giving new meanings to the expression “The Forensics of War” –coined in 1999 by Sebastian Junger in his comment on the Kosovo’s humanitarian crisis (Junger, 1999). Today, it seems accurate to better describe the juridical situation in Mexico as ‘A War on Forensics’, truly a battle for the production and control of evidence.

Ayotzinapa has become a paradigmatic example of this. Focusing on how police officers and attorneys behave during the first two years of the proceedings, the reports prepared in 2015 and 2016 by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), explicitly condemn the orchestrated participation of individuals and institutions in the destruction of evidence. In particular, the reports refer to the loss of video recordings. "Since much evidence was collected following no standards concerning record keeping and processing, GIEI has emphasized the need to always preserve scientific evidence when verifying or discarding the hypothesis elaborated by the Attorney General's Office (PGR). [T]he decision to destroy video recordings at the Justice Palace derived from the fact that judicial authorities considered irrelevant those videos, motivating the discarding which in the end occurred because the Attorney General's Office never ordered the retrieval and preservation of those videos".<sup>3</sup>

However, Ayotzinapa is far from being an isolated case. Before 2014, another important case of biased institutional behaviour was the so-called Special Prosecutor Office for Political and Social Movements of the Past (FEMOSPP). Aiming at investigating cases related to the so-called Dirty War in Mexico, this office was launched in 2001 by ex president Vicente Fox as a new branded organism. Dissolved only five years later, FEMOSPP consumed enormous resources, resolving none of the 570 accusations presented during the time it was active. Furthermore, it was instrumental in expelling expressions such as 'enforced disappearances' and 'genocide' from the institutional vocabulary. Symptomatically, these expressions returned to the public arena after 2015, hand in hand with the proceedings of the Ayotzinapa Case.

3 - The report can be consulted here: <https://centroprodh.org.mx/2017/12/11/informe-giei-ayotzinapa-ii/> [visited December 2019]

## VI.

In an attempt to confront this situation, family members of victims have been collaborating with independent forensic agencies, photojournalist, and artistic collectives in recent years, appropriating and expanding the very concept of counter-forensics. Their mission is to find with life or eventually to identify the remains of their beloved ones. But this is not an easy task. Governmental agents and the organized crime systematically intimidate family members, demonstrators and NGOs, making almost impossible to succeed under such psychological pressure or even under death threats. Done in the first stance to the missing person, violence is in this way extended afterwards to their families and the society at large. More often than would be expected, relatives involved in political activism are assassinated or disappeared, creating a spiral pattern of violence and terror.

Echoing cultural theories on spectrality and hauntology –a concept coined by Jacques Derrida in his book *Specters of Marx*– I have characterized massive enforced disappearances in Mexico as a sort of spectral violence inflicted on the social body as a whole (Barriendos, 2017). In my view, the legal indeterminacy of the disappeared and the biopolitical transposition of terror from absent bodies to the society can be properly characterized as the spectral condition of mass violence. Unlike other forms of State terror, spectral violence impacts the social body both, directly and indirectly, using the

phantasmagorical 'materiality' of the disappeared as an instrument for its own incarnation and somatic reproduction in the everyday life. In doing so, spectral violence erodes the public right to know and blurs the terrain of the politics of truth, extending and updating the domain of governmentality.

Inflicted 'from up to down', but somatised and reproduced horizontally, spectral violence derives from the following paradox: in order to be fully spectral, this form of violence begins by mastering the materiality of the absent body. Obliterated bones, teeth and skulls are in this way the precondition and the point of origination of spectral violence. In Pierre Nora's words, "it relies entirely on the materiality of the trace" (Nora, 1955: 13). From this point of view, spectral violence is a very specific kind of speculative materialism, in the sense that it recognizes the potential existence of human remains but only to make them forensically inaccessible, expelling bones and evidence from the public forum. This is why Forensic Architecture evokes the original meaning of forensis, transforming osteobiography –the cultural interpretation and scientific identification of human remains– into a grassroots instrument of aesthetic communication and social memory.

In his book, *Witnesses from the Grave: The Stories Bones Tell* (1991), Christopher Joyce and Eric Stover describe the technique used by Richard Helmer during the forensic identification of a skull found in Brazil in 1985, presumably the bones of Josef Mengele. Known as the Angel of Death, Mengele was a German physician conducting the most deathly medical experiments at the Auschwitz concentration camp, and he himself was a racist phrenologist interested in skulls and cranial measurements. Called 'face-skull superimposition', the Helmer's technique symptomatically evokes the somatic phantasmagoria we have characterized before as spectral violence. Juxtaposing portraits of Mengele taken while alive, with forensic pictures of the recovered skull, Helmer produced a unique visual dispositive, allowing the forensic gaze to inhabit the spectral frontier between life and death. Joyce and Stover describe the first impression of the craniofacial superimposition of the Angel of Death in the following way:

"The pin-cushion skull came into focus on the television monitor with the photo superimposed onto it. The sight was unnerving. It took a moment for the eye and brain to process the peculiar image. They were seeing a human as no one in life could, as if the skin were a ghostly film [...] 'Now you see that this isn't fantasy', Helmer told his hushed audience. 'This is Josef Mengele'" (JOYCE, 1991: 195)

In Eyal Weizman words, what this technique made possible was to visually deal with the German perpetrator as someone dead and alive simultaneously, "half dead and half alive —a spectral presence— present and represented at one and the same time" (Weizman, 2012: 206). In doing so, Helmer opened the door to new forms of creative insights into human rights proving that, in order to defeat spectral violence, forensics are obligated to produce counter-spectral images.



## VII.

Finding evidence in Mexico has become an aesthetico-political struggle against spectral violence. In claiming for justice and peace, social movements use counter-forensic images and signs, disrupting the hegemonic narrative and the optics of the State. Thus, the so-called 'forensic turn' finds its principles and political capabilities in the performativity of objects and images accurately presented in courtrooms and museums as evidence. As Eyal Wizeman has noticed, "[f]orced disappearance is not only an act of violence against people but also against evidence. It includes the physical destruction of bodies as well as the destruction of evidence and the fabrication of false narratives".<sup>4</sup>

Mexico Investigation, the researching project developed by Forensic Architecture in Mexico, contains useful data and contrasted testimonies, offering the possibility to build a counter-forensic horizontal gaze. Arguably, this was the first attempt to visualize the atrocity in a museum, showing the collusion between the organized crime and various State-level institutions. The goal of the investigation was to collect testimonies from perpetrators and victims, to organize data, and to produce an accessible time-base easy reading cartography of the events. The result was a series of 3D video reconstructions of the kidnapping and a public website integrating reports, maps, testimonies, visuals, cross-referenced data. Prominently located, the project includes a large-scale mural plotting different accounts of the crime.

This mural works as a counter-image of disappearance 'as a narrative form', scripting and unfolding the atrocity on a timescale. Echoing and to some extent contradicting the muralist tradition in Mexico, the large panel is a schematic diagram of State terror. It could be properly described as an architectural topography of violence, where architecture –as Weizman has pointed out– operates as a "political-plastic [...] analogous to Joseph Beuys's concept of art as a social plastic or social sculpture" (Bois, 2016: 128). Extrapolating locations, mobile recordings, eyewitness testimonies, and visual information, the mural exposes the necropolitics of the Mexican State, revealing the spectral foundations of the so-called 'historical truth'. Rather than optical unequivocal truths, the mural presents to our senses a multi-directional assemblage of voices and stories, resulting in the aesthetic activation of our collective social memory.

4 - Exhibition Report. The statement can be consulted here: <https://forensic-architecture.org/programme/exhibitions/disappear> [visited December 2019]



Figure 6: Fig. 6. Teresa Margolles. Pesquisa (2016). Detail.



In accordance with the general mission of this agency, the mural was conceived as something else than a mere illustrated report. Displaying absences and inconsistencies, it is in itself a sensorial researching tool. For Forensic Architecture, architectural modeling and video installation work as an “art of memory for the digital age” (Bois, 2016: 129), heightening the subject/object sensorium and encouraging the aesthetic performativity of human rights. Forensic Architecture also serves as a public forum, counter-monument, and a place of mourning for the disappeared.

## VII.

Considering the enormous impact that the Ayotzinapa Case had and still has today in Mexico is with no surprise that various artists and aesthetico-political collectives have elaborated on the case, using the numeral 43 as a disruptive sign against spectral violence. Using photography, multimedia installations, expanded graphics, and even human remains as a part of their projects, an important number of contemporary artists address what I called the sensible presence of the absent body; that is, the somatic experience of the disappeared by instantiating absence in a trace.

Only six months after the kidnaping, technology-based Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer launched *Level of Confidence* (2015), an interactive installation with a face-recognition camera. Based on the same biometric surveillance algorithms used by the police and the military, *Level of Confidence* establishes a sort of visual familiarity between the social body and the disappeared students. [Fig. 2] Standing in front of the camera, the dispositive makes a facial recognition of the viewer, offering what Lozano-Hemmer calls the higher ‘level of confidence’, that is, the maxim degree of craniofacial relationship between the features of the visitor and the student that looks more like the viewer.

In 2019, Chinese artists Ai Weiwei had a solo show in Mexico entitled *Re-establishing Memories*. For the exhibition, Ai Weiwei produced an installation including a large-scale multicolour mural consisting of 46 portrays –43 of the still missing students and 3 of students assassinated during the events in September 2014. The mural is divided in two parts by a horizontal imaginary line. [Fig. 3] At the top, the mural shows a mosaic of faces; actually, digitized images made after portrays build with millions of LEGO colourful blocks. Unlike most black and white pictures that have circulated publicly of the students, these portrays are fully solarized, producing a sense of liveliness. In the bottom, the mural presents a chronology of events, which somehow resembles the mural produced in 2017 by Forensic Architecture. Unlike Eyal Wiezman cartography though, Ai Weiwei narrates not only the incidents occurred in September 26-27, but the *longue durée* of modern Mexico, from 1821 until 2019. It is accurate to say that Ai Weiwei is interested not only in the historical conditions that made possible Ayotzinapa, but also in the consequences of the tragic event. The piece is counterpointed with a series of documentaries produced between 2016-2019. Including the voice of family members of the students, scholars and activists. Rather than traditional testimonies of the case, interviews elaborate on the aftermaths of Ayotzinapa.

43 Students from Ayotzinapa (2014) is the title of an installation by Argentinian artist Javier del Olmo. The piece consists of 43 portraits of the students produced in dactylographic paper with a mechanical typewriter. The paper roll is still inserted into the typewriter, which lies on the floor. Face features have been produced using the letters of the word 'Ayotzinapa' and the sentence 'Todos somos' ("We all are"). The installation elaborates on the frontiers between collective and individual subjectivities, playing conceptually and phonetically with the first syllables of 'Ayotzinapa': 'Ay' (Oh!) and 'Yo' (I). The description of the piece includes a sort of deconstructive poem alluding to the following ideas: 'Ayotzinapa sin yo' (Ayotzinapa without I), 'Ayotzinapa letra por letra' (Ayotzinapa letter by letter), 'Entre letra y letra estoy yo, entre letra y letra estás vos, entre palabra y palabra estamos todos' (I am between letters, you are between letters, we all are between words). [Fig. 4]

### VIII.

Mexican artist Teresa Margolles has been working with absent bodies and disappearance for more than two decades. Trained in criminal forensics, her strategy is to deal with the materiality of violence and death, implying but not necessarily representing the missing body. In her work, the body is presented in absentia. In this way, Margolles turns absence into a political and aesthetic territory. A territory inhabited by spectral memories. Spectrality and phantasmagoria turned into forensic and aesthetic categories. In front of her work, we are exposed to the trace of homicides, feminicides, enforced disappearances, organized crimes, and extrajudicial executions. Mexico appears as a painful and repulsive reality. We easily find objects related to death, violence and crime scenes. However, something seems to be missing all the time. There is terror, but no actual corpses. Fluids, body parts, footprints, odours, inscriptions and other forms of indexical signs are easy to smell, but never a corpse as such.

Sounds of Death (2008) is an installation consisting of audio recordings registered in locations where female corpses were found. Captured by the intriguing titled of the piece, we immediately realize that the collected sounds have nothing to do with the noises produced during the finding, examination or transportation of the female bodies. Actually, what we hear has no direct connection with the corpses. We know those corpses were at some point in that very location, but what we hear is just the spectral echo of the body. In searching bodies, we are forced to sense only their absence. In Burial (2000), Margolles presents a concrete block with an encased foetus. The work explores the material and symbolic frontiers between life and dead. Since stillbirths can be or not considered corpses, in some countries they are commemorated whereas in others are simply discarded as throwaways. When this piece travels in order to be exhibited abroad, the burial also deals with legal/ethical conceptions of human life and medical 'waste'.

In pieces such as *In the Air* (2003), Margolles blows water bubbles into empty rooms, creating a state of calm and joyful. At some point, visitors realize that the water they are touching and inhaling has been previously used for washing corpses, in preparation for the autopsy of people violently killed. In *Vaporization* (2001), Margolles sprays steam water also taken from the morgue. In the sprayed fog and bubbles resonates the absence of the body. Though there is no visual presence of any specific subject, people in the room actually touches, at least indirectly, the remains of a human being. Pleasure and joyful suddenly give place to a state of abjection and discomfort. Here the word autopsy, like forensic, returns to its original meaning. Derived from the Latin word *autopsia*, autopsy means “eye-witnessing” or “to see something with your own eyes”. In both pieces, our gaze witnesses nothing but an absent body, incorporated into our own ontology of fear.

*36 Bodies* (2006) is an installation composed of 36 threads, previously used for stitching up bodies after the autopsy. These threads pertain to bodies that suffered extreme harm and deadly pain. Tied together as corpses holding hands, *36 Bodies* creates a silent tension, reducing the bodies to a horizontal line in the space. *Embroidered fabric* (2012) is a collaborating project between the artist and a group of indigenous female activist from Guatemala. [Fig. 5] The work consists of a piece of fabric intervened by this group of women during a series of conversations on community violence and disappearance. Victims of state terrorism and impunity, these women use traditional embroidering techniques on a piece of fabric that previously served for covering corpses at the morgue. The result is a haptic map of mass violence in Guatemala, resulting from the juxtaposition of fluids, blood, erasures, and traditional designs. *Pesquisa* (2016) is an installation of 30 posters with images of missing women from Ciudad Juárez. Margolles photographed these posters over the years, interested in the erasures and mutilations of the printed faces. Physical agents such as rain and dust deteriorate the images, echoing the way in which the State and the law forget the existence of the missing bodies. [Fig. 6]

## IX.

Arguably, it seems to be an inverse correlation between the escalating presence of extreme violence in the public sphere in Mexico and the radicalization of minimalist or abstractionist aesthetics in artists such as Teresa Margolles. The hypothesis suggests that the so-called ‘war on drugs’ declared in 2006 by ex president Felipe Calderón, not only increased the presence of corpses operating as statements in the streets and the media, but also forced artists to find non-representational alternative ways to deal with violence, brutality, bloody crimes, and phantasmagoria. What is at stake in this hypothesis is the potential incapacity of the image to communicate extreme situations when the public sphere is saturated and haunted by the presence of horror and spectral violence.

Jacques Rancière has characterized this situation as the moral exhaustion of the image, arguing that images are exhausted not because they are mere fictions, representations or phantasies, but rather because there is an excess of reality in the very body of the image (Rancière, 2009). In the same way that exhumations disrupt the

topography of our social memory, we can excavate as well the very foundations of our visual culture. This explains why an increased number of artists have been trying to make sense of the scale and complexity of spectral violence in Mexico. In an epoch defined by the aesthetics and necropolitics of disappearance, our cultural imaginaries are saturated with reality, as Jacques Rancière argues, but also with spectrality. It is not a coincidence that most of them address not only the materiality of human remains, but also the immateriality of the absent body.

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**DOSSIÊ**

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