

The Investigative Mode of the Berlin Biennale Raises an Uncomfortable Question: Who Is All This Research Really for?

Several of the works on view rehearse well-documented stories, suggesting that facts speak for themselves. They don't.

Ben Davis, July 12, 2022



Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *The Natural History of Rape* (2017/2022) in the Berlin Biennale. Photo by Ben Davis.

When I look back over what was actually in the current Berlin Biennale, curated by artist Kader Attia and titled "Still Present!", it seems a lot less dire than I remember.

In fact, there's a lot of poetry in Attia's show. There are Tammy Nguyen's vibrant, verdant paintings, rendering the Biblical Stations of the Cross but in an indelibly intricate style. I sat twice through Haig Aivazian's *They May Own the Lanterns But We*

Have the Light, Episode 1: Home Alone (2022), which strings together found cartoons into a ghostly black-and-white dream-tale.

Zach Blas's techno-horror installation is bombastic, but also truly unnerving. Tuan Andrew Nguyen's film *My Ailing Beliefs Can Cure Your Wretched Desires* (2017) memorably weaves together myths and political musings. There's Mónica de Miranda's mythic film, *Path to the Stars* (2022), and Amal Kenawy's resonant animation, *The Purple Artificial Flower* (2005).

There's a lot of wit, formal flair, and intelligence in all these works.

Overall, the show is pitched as Kader Attia's survey of "two decades of decolonial engagement," a framing device I think has overdetermined the way critics have experienced it—though "Still Present!" does contain a fair amount of art that feels like a homework assignment, enough to color the whole thing.



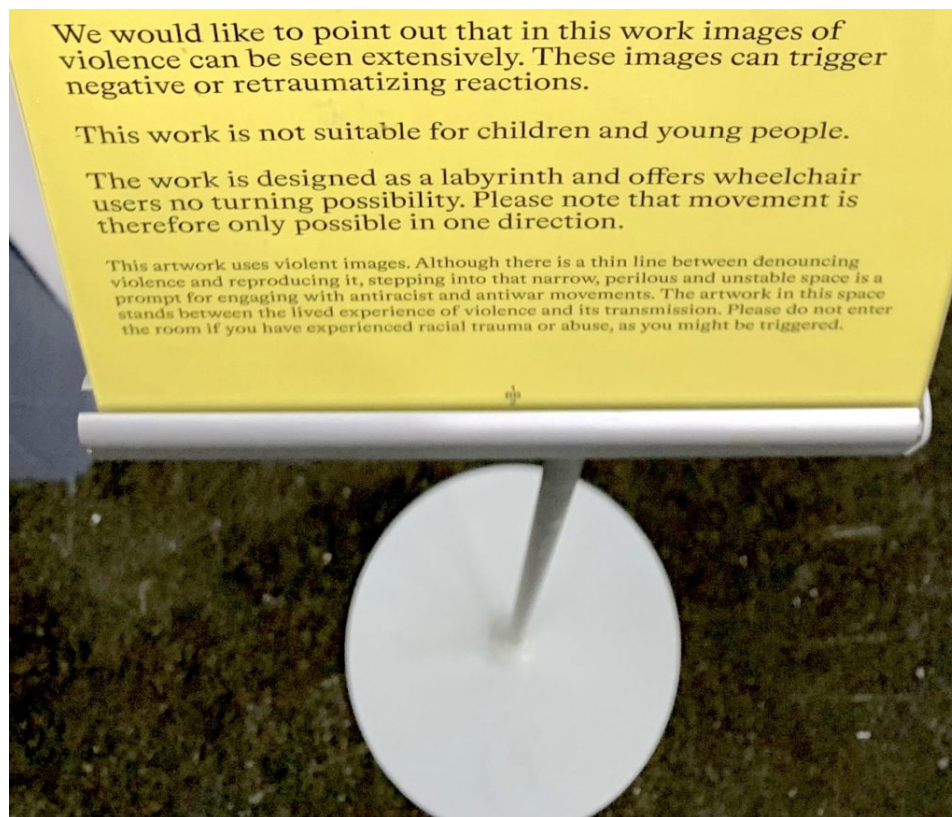
Uriel Orlow, *Reading Wood (Backwards)* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

As opposed to the sociable, DIY chill-out sensibility of the current Documenta, the 2022 Berlin Biennale feels like Biennale Classic, a Biennale full of Biennale Art: work

characterized by a combination of aloofness and political declaration, often with a mild gulf between the object and the wall text filled in by an assumption of shared belief. A number of this show's stars (Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Forensic Architecture, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Uriel Orlow, Susan Schullpi, Attia himself) are among the most-shown figures at big art exhibitions of the last five years.

I agree with Rahel Aima, who wrote in *Frieze* that one of the overall effects of Attia's exhibition is to leave you asking "who is this for?" And not just in front of a work like Jean-Jacques Lebel's *Poison soluble* (2013), the 2022 Berlin Biennale's most controversial moment. That installation traps you inside a literal maze composed of blown-up details of the ultra-graphic Abu Ghraib photos of U.S. soldiers torturing and humiliating Iraqi prisoners.

Who *is* this for? It's not as if the Abu Ghraib torture photos are news—they had a huge geopolitical effect from the moment they were first published 18 years ago by CBS, and caused a lot of anguish for Iraqis. I guess the idea here is that if we literally *force* the First World subject to confront this material again, some new catharsis will happen? But Lebel's work does so by signal-boosting the degradation it decries. *Poison soluble* had to be supplemented by a rather panicked trigger warning.



A trigger warning on view at the Berlin Biennale outside of Jean-Jacques Lebel's *Poison soluble* (2013). Photo ben Ben Davis.

Investigative Aesthetics, Revisited

There's quite a bit going on in the show, and any number of routes to cut through its 80-plus artists. The main issue I'm going to talk about in relationship to Attia's Berlin Biennale is the current status of "investigative aesthetics."

As I understand it, that term, associated with the group Forensic Architecture, was meant specifically to resist the temptation, evidenced by Lebel, to make art that tried to rouse its audience by directly showing atrocities or suffering. Instead, the idea was to assume the persona of an investigator, marshaling high-tech evidence, advancing specific cases.

Thus, when Forensic Architecture showed the three-channel video 77sqm 9:26min at Documenta 14 in 2017 it was received as an advance on the more abstract fulminations of a lot of global Biennale Art. Its presence at Documenta was part of an ongoing agitation around the 2006 murder of immigrant Halit Yozgat by neo-Nazis. Using digital animation to recreate the internet café where the crime had taken place, the artwork carefully unspooled evidence that an undercover agent on the scene had lied under oath, and thereby may have taken part in the killing.

Highlighting Forensic Architecture's presence at Documenta, Hili Perlson would say that its work was "stretching the definition of what may constitute an artwork." Now, five years on, Forensic Architecture's art-as-investigation is one of the most prominent and in-demand genres of art.

But compare 77sqm_9:26min from Documenta 14 to Airstrike on Babyn Yar (2022), on view at the Hamburger Bahnhof in this Berlin Biennale. While the former investigation took eight months and built on activism ongoing since 2006, the later engages with an event that happened just three months prior: the Russian missile attack on a TV tower in Kiyv on March 1, 2022.



Forensic Architecture, *Airstrike on Babyn Yar* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

“We gathered over dozens of videos, maps, and archival materials in order to study how these strikes hit not only media and communication networks but a tangled nervous system of historical references and repressed memories,” the narrator intones, in clinical voice. *Airstrike on Babyn Yar* goes on to detail how the Russian missile attack on the TV tower also hit the nearby Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial, pointing out the symbolic significance of this fact as linking two atrocities.

But this connection was not in need of investigating, not really. *77sqm_9:26min* was meaningful as an act of “counter-forensics,” a particularly resonant concept because the official German authorities investigating the murder of Halit Yozgat were potentially in league with his killers. But there is no serious “counter-forensic” aspect to *Airstrike on Babyn Yar*: the symbolism of attacking a Holocaust memorial

was *the* media narrative about this event, pointed out immediately by Ukrainian President Zelensky in a Tweet after the attack as a way to shock the conscience of the world, and widely shared everywhere in outraged Western media coverage.

What, then, does *Airstrike on Babyn Yar*'s investigation bring to the table? Onscreen, the video shows you different clips of the missile hitting the TV tower. "With the metadata from this clip that was sent to us directly, we corrected the time stamp from other videos, and determined the time of the strike was 5:08 a.m., which matches the first reports of the strike."

To sum up: Forensic Architecture has been able to confirm that the time of a particular Russian airstrike was... the same as the first reports of that same Russian airstrike.

My suspicion is that this work exists here not because there was something urgent to investigate—there have been far grislier and far more shocking crimes by now—but to fill a need in this Berlin Biennale to address the war in Ukraine somehow. And so, despite the performance of investigation, we're back to the old danger of Biennale Art, with artists on call for big art events to throw together some resonant material to make a Serious Statement.

The Problem of Purpose

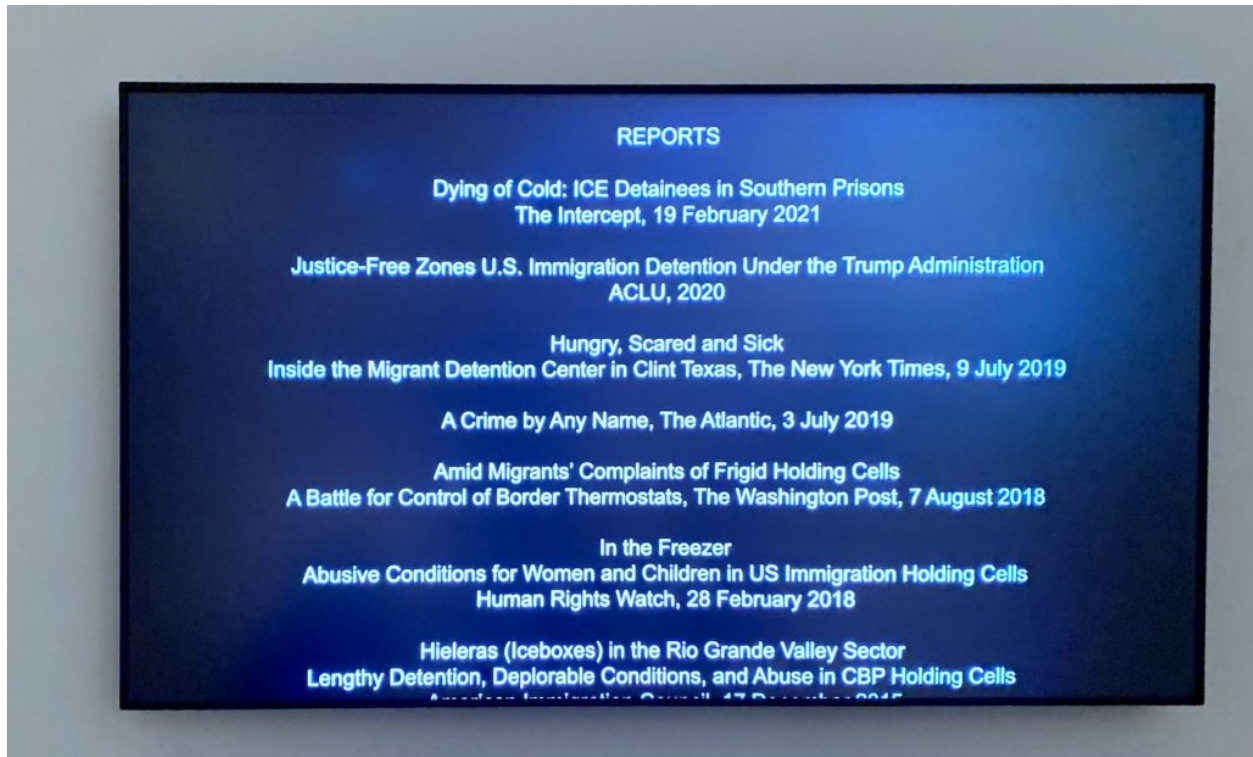
Susan Schuppli is associated with Forensic Architecture and is the author of *Material Witness: Material, Forensics, Evidence*, a book on the possibilities of art-making that interrogates how objects bear witness to various crimes. Her work *Icebox Detention Along the U.S.-Mexico Border* (2021–22) is on view at the KW Art Institute.

This work is, once again, a narrated investigation. It draws together evidence that U.S. border agents use freezing temperatures as an instrument of abuse, stating its mission as being an investigation of "a new thermo-politics defined by cold." The facts Schuppli lays out are clear and scandalous—though also, once again, very well known to people who watch the news. (Perhaps they are more important to highlight now, when the U.S. media simply doesn't report on the border as much as it did during the Trump administration, even as abuses go on.)



Susan Schuppli, *Icebox Detention Along the U.S.-Mexico Border* (2021-2022). Photo by Ben Davis. But the words from Schuppli's video narration that haunt me are the following: "despite numerous investigative reports... 'icebox detention' continues unabated." If numerous professional investigative journalists and large human rights non-profits have *already* exposed the same facts to the public, in platforms with much bigger reach than the Berlin Biennale, what is this video hoping to add to the mix?

The project's own description of its mission is that it "invites viewers to reflect upon the ethical imaginaries implicit in the conjoined term just-ice and by extension the experiential valence of temperature as it both interacts with and is instrumentalized by institutions, bodies, materials, and environments."



List of sources for the data in Susan Schuppli, *Icebox Detention Along the U.S.-Mexico Border*.
Photo by Ben Davis.

If you were being ungenerous you might suspect that the form of spectatorship that such art implies is, on average, not being chastened or informed, but the half-disavowed pleasure of recognizing oneself in its footnotes from the *Atlantic*, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and so on. “Yes, I too am the kind of person who keeps informed of such things; therefore I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am on the correct side of the moral line.”

In fact, I *hope* that is how most people receive it. Because if you think more deeply about *Icebox Detention Along the U.S.-Mexico Border*, it literally informs its audience that the mere exposure of facts has done nothing, even as it sticks closely to the form of being an expose of facts. Its logical effect is not to rouse the audience, but to make it tune out.



Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Air Conditioning* (2022) in the Berlin Biennale. Photo by Ben Davis.

Yet another artist associated with Forensic Architecture in “Still Present!” is Lawrence Abu Hamdan. His work, *Air Conditioning* (2022), is the first thing you encounter at the KW space. It consists of a well-researched but short informational video laying out Israel’s history of violating Lebanon’s air space over the past 15 years, based on U.N. documents. This seems an important topic, and newer terrain to me in terms of data.

In addition to the video, Abu Hamdan offers a long mural that occupies the walls of the adjoining, giant, otherwise empty gallery. Using a software that simulates clouds, a trail of artificial vapor is rendered, supposedly using the U.N. data as a basis for its fluctuating shape, so that the long ribbon of depicted clouds acts as an illustration of the history of noise pollution over Lebanon from Israeli drones and fighter jets, each centimeter being a day.

But honestly, this is just not a very compelling way to convey the visceral human impact of the material in question. Nor is it a truly useful infographic, since it doesn’t visualize any comparisons with other types of sonic environments that would give you a sense of how relatively severe the noise is. Nor is this artificial vapor plume a particularly arresting image on its own, detached from its role as data-illustration or

advocacy. On all counts, the effect of *Air Conditioning* is nebulous. (The [project's website](#) seems to be its currently most convincing form.)



Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Air Conditioning* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

Clouds on the Horizon

One of the few works getting consistent praise from this show, even from its critics like [Isabella Zamboni](#), is another work about clouds: Forensic Architecture's other video, *Cloud Studies* (2021), at the Akademie der Künste, Hanseatenweg. It is actually less a single work and more of a summa of various Forensic Architecture projects from the recent past, with excerpts from different investigations the group has done threaded together with a voiceover on the theme of clouds.

Cloud Studies moves between a discussion of Israel's illegal use of white phosphorous in Gaza, to struggles against methane gas flares from fracking sites in Argentina, to the deaths by smoke inhalation during London's Grenfell Tower fire disaster.



Forensic Architecture, *Cloud Studies* (2021). Photo by Ben Davis.

At one point, the video compares the work Forensic Architecture has done building computer models analyzing different explosions to the 19th-century tradition of “cloud atlases” created by amateur meteorologists, or to atmosphere studies created by landscape painters. But *Cloud Studies*’s real point is political: the tour of Forensic Architecture’s various initiatives is, in effect, an argument that all these struggles are one: “we the citizens of toxic clouds must resist in common action.”

I agree with Forensic Architecture’s general political perspective on these different matters, I think. The video is lovely and lucid.



Forensic Architecture, *Cloud Studies* (2021) in the Berlin Biennale. Photo by Ben Davis.

But what I realized, watching *Cloud Studies* a second time, is how much the video's effect depends on that pre-existing agreement on my part. In its own description of itself, it is not doing something so ordinary as making a case: "our 'cloud studies' meander between shape and fog, between analysis and experience."

The common links between, say, the suffocating pollution caused by deliberately set forest fires in Indonesia and dictator Bashar al-Assad's use of chlorine gas in Syria may seem obvious within a certain progressive milieu, but not much beyond it. I'm not sure the appeal to the "citizens of toxic clouds" does any work to build tangible arguments linking different, situated, hotly contested struggles. It's a poetic device—which is to say, *artistic* in the most classic sense.

In a video that condenses a variety of larger research projects into a montage, the "investigative aesthetic" becomes visible as a set of tropes: zooming in and out of maps or computer models; highlighting sections of photos or overlaying squares on details of footage; synching up different bits of footage or audio; voiceover references to algorithms, models, and computer scripts.

“Art has been very good in the last decades in problematizing the notion of truth, insisting that narratives are more complex than we’re told, that art is about doubt,” Eyal Weizman, of Forensic Architecture, said of *77sqm_9:26min* five years ago. “We want to show another possibility of art—one that can confront doubt, and uses aesthetic techniques in order to interrogate.” In retrospect, it seems significant that this style of art-making gained such cachet at exactly the moment of the panic about “post-truth,” the idea that the ascendent right had somehow outflanked the postmodernists on their own terrain of epistemological doubt and narrative fragmentation.

But the pitfall, as Lisa Deml wrote in a review of Schuppli’s book *Material Witness*, was always that this style snuck back in a relatively unsophisticated positivism—that is, the idea that “facts speak for themselves” beyond ideology and context, so that a mythology of forensic prowess comes to stand in for making compelling images or persuasive arguments.

What the Data Says

Here’s why I’m worrying these issues now. Over at Hamburger Bahnhof again, there’s another data-journalism-as-art installation by David Chavalarias. Here we take “investigative aesthetics” to the point where Attia just literally displays a book by Chavalarias, *Toxic Data*, on the wall. Chavalarias does not identify as an artist; he’s a researcher at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS).



A book by David Chavalarias displayed in the Berlin Biennale. Photo by Ben Davis.

The bulk of his installation presents one long infographic on the gallery wall, showing color-coded data gathered from an application he has created called the Politoscope, tracking the influence of various political tendencies online over time.

Laying out years of Twitter data, the graphic shows the upward trajectory of right-wing and xenophobic presence over the last five years, which now dominates the conversation. Chillingly, Chavalarias says that he was inspired to do this work by his interest in tracking the breakdown in civic discourse leading up to the Rwandan genocide. I hope we're not close to there yet.



David Chavalarias, *Shifting Collectives* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

These are the same five years that the “investigative aesthetic” became a dominant mainstream genre of art in the institutions. The point being: Now seems like a good time to check in on some of the political communication strategies adopted in the recent past, both in the museum and out. How effective are they at getting things done? How capable are they of reaching wider audiences? And to what degree do they serve the purpose of consoling a progressive audience in its own increasing isolation within a larger culture war that it is losing?

“The 11th Berlin Biennale: Still Present!” is on view in Berlin, through September 18, 2022.

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/berlin-biennale-2022-review-2144516>