
Three Doors, One Preamble, and One Poem Forensic Architecture at DEPO Istanbul

A.S. Bruckstein Çoruh.

With an image by Khaled Tanji, and a poem by Khaled Alsaid.

Published in Turkish by Art Unlimited no. 84, November 2024, Istanbul.



Image: Khaled Tanji, *The Prison Cell of Oury Jalloh* (2024), installation view of Forensic Architecture, *Üç Kapı/Three Doors*, Exhibit at DEPO, October 25, 2024. Copyright Khaled Tanji. Courtesy Khaled Tanji, DEPO Istanbul, Art Unlimited Istanbul, and House of Taswir.

Zum Artikel im Blog: <https://taswir.org/2024/11/three-doors-and-one-poem/>

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An Essay by House of Taswir on *Üç Kapı/Three Doors* by Forensic Architecture at DEPO Istanbul

أقسمُ إنني خفتُ كثيراً

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لا أملكُ شيئاً لنفسي، لكنني خفتُ كثيراً / تذكرتُ مواعدي معكِ، وخفتُ كثيراً / لم أطمع بشيءٍ وقتها، أغمضتُ عينيّ ومشيتُ وخفتُ كثيراً / اقتربتُ قذيفةً مني، أعرّتها نصف انتباهي وخفتُ كثيراً / خفتُ من أشجار زيتون تخبي خلفها رجلاً لا يعرفني ولا أعرّفه، لكننا ولسبب ما عدوان، فخفتُ أن يصرخَ بي صوت بندقيته؛ فنصرخُ أُمي .. / نجوت "موقتاً" ركضتُ، دستُ على جثة بالخطأ، وخفتُ كثيراً / انتبهتُ أنها لم تكن جثةً كاملة، فخفتُ أكثر / لم أملكُ لنفسي شيئاً. جلستُ إلى جانب نصف الجثة أفكرُ لمن تكون نصف الجثة هذه؟ ونسيتُ أن أفكر: أين نصفها الثاني، وخفتُ كثيراً.

خالد السعيد¹

"For more than a year, we have been spectators to one of the most gruesome and violent episodes of mass murder and destruction in modern history. Yet, what distinguishes the genocide of the Palestinians from the hitherto committed atrocities, genocides, and mass killings, is the way in which its every second is being recorded, documented, and shared, often instantly and by the victims themselves. What also distinguishes this genocide from that of the Namibians, Armenians, the Holocaust, and the Tutsi is the volume of critical historical and political analysis that has been emerging during the event itself. It seems as if we have made and heard all

hiding behind them a man who doesn't know me and I don't know him, but for some reason we are enemies, and I was afraid that the sound of his gun would scream at me; my mother would scream. I ran, I stepped on a body by mistake, I was very scared / I realized it wasn't a whole body, I was even more scared / I didn't have anything for myself. I sat next to the half-body thinking, 'Whose half-body is this?' and I forgot to think: Where is the other half, and I got very scared.' Thanks to poet Khaled Alsaïd for allowing us to publish parts of this poem. The English translation was done in collaboration with Ali Kaaf, with many thanks.

¹ Poem (fragment) by Khaled Alsaïd: "I swear I was so scared. / I had nothing for myself, but I was very scared / I remembered my date with you, and I was very scared / I didn't dream anything at the time, I closed my eyes and walked and I was very scared / A shell came close to me, I gave it half my attention and I was very scared / I was scared of olive trees

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possible arguments. But nothing has changed, and the war machine seeks destruction in Palestine and Lebanon at an ever-intensifying pace. Yet, to combat despair and paralysis, we ask, is it still possible to think—historically, politically, critically—the unfolding genocide without turning the event itself into thought? What can art do or how can it do differently, given the overproduction of images, media, and visual representations of the ongoing genocide?"

Angela Harutyunyan²

Three Doors

Forensic Architecture, the interdisciplinary research collective known for its open-source criminal investigations into human rights violations, is back in Istanbul. Under the guidance of Eyal Weizman, its principal investigator, it is showing a deeply

ambitious, intellectually demanding, and heavily research-based exhibition at DEPO, titled *Üç Kapı/Three Doors*. "Three doors" refer to doors that should have remained open while they were locked, doors that should have stayed locked while they were opened, or doors that should have been broken up while they remained untouched, all to save lives or prevent crime. At DEPO art space, Forensic Architecture addresses two specific cases of deadly racism and police negligence in Germany.

In the city of Hanau, Germany, on the night of February 19, 2020, a German far-right extremist carried out a mass shooting, targeting two shisha bars and killing nine people with immigrant backgrounds, predominantly of Turkish, Kurdish, Afghan, Bosnian, and Romani descent: Gökhan Gültekin, Ferhat Unvar, Mercedes Kierpacz, Said Nesar Hashemi, Sedat Gürbüz, Fatih Saraçoğlu, Hamza Kurtović, Kaloyan Velkov, and Vili Viorel Păun. Say their names! The exhibit at DEPO presents a full forensic investigation of the unfolding of the Hanau events. It shows an overwhelming amount of evidence using

² Announcement of a public discussion in Berlin with Yasmeen Daher, Sami Khatib, and Basma al-Sharif on "Palestine Before/After" on November 6, 2024. The discussion was moderated by Angela Harutyunyan, art historian, curator, and professor at the University of the Arts (UdK) in Berlin.

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digital 3D modeling, minute audio and video analyses, and lengthy interviews with family members and eyewitnesses. Scores of wall charts painstakingly trace the story of the four-year struggle of the families, survivors, and allies who continue to seek justice for the victims until this very day, to no avail, years after the crime happened.

When state authorities or the police are involved in a crime, or are unable or unwilling to prevent it, there is no justice for the victims. In such cases, it is necessary for civil society to “take control of the evidence”: to conduct independent investigations and exert public pressure with its own resources and using its own strength.³

The exhibit undertakes the work that state attorneys and police should have done and

fatally failed to do, appropriating methods of juridical profiling, audio and video surveillance, witness examination, external expert reports, face recognition, 3D modelling, and more. The collective embraces these methods to reappropriate a civic pursuit of justice and show the blind spots of structural racism in “liberal societies” in which perpetrators get away with impunity.

On the upper floor, we step into a meticulously reconstructed model of a prison cell, a life-sized architectural maquette related to the death of an asylum seeker from Sierra Leone who burned to death in the police station in Dessau, Germany, in 2005. His name was Oury Jalloh. Jalloh was detained by the Dessau police on the morning of January 7 for alleged improper behavior (this was never clarified). He was handcuffed, taken to the prison cell, put on a fireproof mattress, his hands tied to the mattress, his feet tied to the floor. His body was found burned to death by midday that same day, with his feet and hands still restrained. The official investigation claimed that Jalloh set himself fire using a lighter that had

³ Cited from the booklet accompanying the exhibition at DEPO, which runs from September to December 2024.

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allegedly somehow been overlooked. Forensic Architecture together with independent forensic experts, especially fire experts, and in collaborating with family, activists, and an initiative “In Memoriam Oury Jalloh,” refuted this claim by gathering an overwhelming amount of evidence that is exhibited in DEPO in all its forensic detail.

The main lead in their investigations? The door to Jalloh’s prison cell. Was it open? Was it closed? How does an open door affect the dynamic of a fire? Can it be proven that the door was open? Can the amount of oxygen be ascertained from smoke patterns on the doorframe and walls? If the door was open, who set the fire? What do the footprints in the dust of ashes suggest?

Anyone who has access to Forensic Architecture’s overwhelming evidence, including the judges who heard the case in court (in vain), will realize that there is no way that the thirty-six-year-old man from Serra Leone could have lit the fireproof mattress all by himself. Fire expert reports available to the visitor at DEPO suggest

that someone must have used an accelerant, such as gasoline, to ignite the fire on the fireproof mattress on purpose.

Standing inside the reconstructed maquette of the cell, the visitor will have to muster courage to immerse herself fully in the forensic analysis of the artist collective. Forensic Architecture does not only challenge the official version of state-led investigations, but also involves the visitor personally in the evidence, calling for the courage to speak up, to get involved, to protest injustice, to scream out for those whose immense fear and pain is met by the horrendous indifference and outrageous casualness of the liberal bourgeois public in their habitual consumption of news.

We live in times in which the genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza and the Westbank continues in full force with the whole world watching in real time. We live in times in which people are being indiscriminately killed by the Israeli army in South Lebanon, Beirut, and even in Damascus, Teheran, and other places. We live in times in which new words are being

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coined such as *scholasticide*, *epistemicide*, or *urbicide* to grasp the systematic annihilation not only of people and entire family records but also of places of knowledge, prayer, communal life, and entire cities, ancient and not.

Therefore . . . is it still possible
. . . we ask . . . to think of the
unfolding genocide without
turning the event itself into
thought?

Üç Kapı/Three Doors addresses cases of violence in which justice did not prevail. Even though there is no direct mention, the author cannot but think of Palestine when walking through Forensic Architecture's exhibit.⁴ From

psychoanalytic theory we know that the thing left out, the thing unspoken, often structures the manifest discourse from behind the scenes. From (political) theories we know that the thing unspoken may also relate to the question how (not) to speak under conditions of surveillance,⁵ as it may touch upon a truth that (if revealed or spoken) may come at the cost of one's freedom or life. In both cases, the thing unspoken leads to what is abysmally manifest.

The DEPO exhibition focuses on German right-wing racist violence against immigrants and foreigners, often with strong ties to Nazi networks. If we shift the focus just a bit to the current public protests against the genocide in Palestine

⁴ Eyal Weizman and Forensic Architecture have consistently addressed the violence of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. In *The Architecture of Violence*, a 2014 Al Jazeera documentary, Eyal Weizman describes the occupation's architectural violence, how Israel's design of public spaces enforces separation and exerts control, creating an oppressive and untenable environment for Palestinians. In 2014 Forensic Architecture investigated the killing of six members of the Salha family by a bomb dropped on their home in Bet Hanoun on July 9, 2014. See also

Eyal Weizman's and Forensic Architecture's extensive publications on the intertwinement of counterforensics, microhistories, and art, including Mathew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2021) and, most recently, *A Cartography of Genocide: Israel's Conduct in Gaza since October 2023*, published on social media by Forensic Architecture in late October 2024.

⁵ Cf. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

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brought to the streets of Berlin by Palestinian and non-Palestinian activists, critical intellectuals and artists, many critical Jewish intellectuals among them, and if we then see the way they are exposed to police violence and state suppression, there are good reasons to believe that the racial hostilities coming from the far right in Hanau and Dessau have long moved to the center of the liberal society in Germany. Democratic post-Nazi Germany for more than seventy years has created a culture of remembrance trying to undo the collective guilt of Nazi Germans' killing millions of Jews, Roma, and Sinti, and other marginalized communities in a genocide one thought has no equal. How did the State go about it? How did it go about undoing and "repairing" (*wieder gut machen*) that abysmal kind of collective guilt?

Postwar Germany settled the murderous account of having killed six million Jews by buying into the equation of the political movement of Zionism with Judaism and Jewish tradition. Being faithful to the Zionist project and to defend the politics of

Israel at whatever costs⁶ has become a fatefully obligatory gesture within the German liberal discourse of memory and guilt. This gesture often takes on the nature of a public confession ("we pledge to stand side by side with Israel" and so forth), and it has enormous intellectual as well as military consequences. Militarily and economically speaking, it implies the export of weapons worth billions of euros to the state of Israel, including submarines, air-defense components, drones, anti-tank weapons, and ammunition in the twenty-first century alone, intensified significantly after October 2023. Intellectually, the equation of Zionism with Judaism and, vice versa, of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism has disastrous consequences for the critical acumen of the Jewish tradition itself. It means to absurdly deny the Jew any critical position, any embrace of a radical pursuit of justice now and in the future (something that Jewish tradition was proud of in its diasporic past) by

⁶ Against all evidence provided by recent Jewish and Israel historians showing the colonial violence inherent in the Zionist project, see the works by Ilan Pappé and Avi Shlaim and many more.

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reason of the German state. The cancellation of exhibitions, lectures, seminars, book publications, and public discourse in German State institutions affecting critical intellectuals and artists, particularly Palestinian and Arab, many Jews among them, is a proof in point. One could also say: in the context of the struggle for Palestinian liberation the critical Jew finds herself aligned with the Oriental again, with the non-white Other, the Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, just as in the nineteenth century, when she, the Jew, was first and foremost seen as an Oriental foreigner. Protests in support of a Free Palestine in Germany? Surveilled by the state, suppressed by police. The systemic grid of obstructing civic solidarity with marginalized “Others” by reason of the state can again be witnessed widely in Berlin.

We know that blind spots shift according to geopolitical position, and that—when featured in an Istanbul art space—tropes such as “Hanau,” “Dessau,” and “Germany” may well trigger more blind spots on matters of surveillance and persecution that could be invoked locally. What doesn’t

shift, however, is the way the investigative research of Forensic Architecture reclaims the language of the persecutor, “clear and distinct” as a civic tool of protest for the realm of contemporary art.⁷ Just like artists Harun Farocki, Jenny Holzer, Walid Raad, and many more, Forensic Architecture is smuggling the collectively repressed into the sphere of the museum.

Shulamit Bruckstein/House of Taswir in Istanbul, October 27, 2024.

The Arabic poem at the beginning of the essay is by poet and writer Khaled Alsaid, prizewinning author of the books *In Between* (2011) and *No One Flatters the Neighborhood’s Women* (2020). He is based in Istanbul.

⁷ The work of Forensic Architecture follows the architectural, artistic methods of 3D modeling and computer simulation prominently exhibited by artist Harun Farocki in his work *Serious Games I–IV* (2009–10). Farocki’s work explored the military and commercial use of those digital modeling, exposing the violence of war and researching the transference of military instruments to the contemporary entertainment industry of art and gaming.



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The image *The Prison Cell of Ouri Jalloh* is by Khaled Tanji, Palestinian filmmaker and director of photography known for his captivating visual storytelling and acute attention to detail. He is the winner of the Best Cinematographer award at the Tokyo Film Festival (2023) and the Audience Award at the Vienna Film Festival (2023) for his work on *In Between* (2017).

Copy-Editing: Tas Skorupa with many thanks.