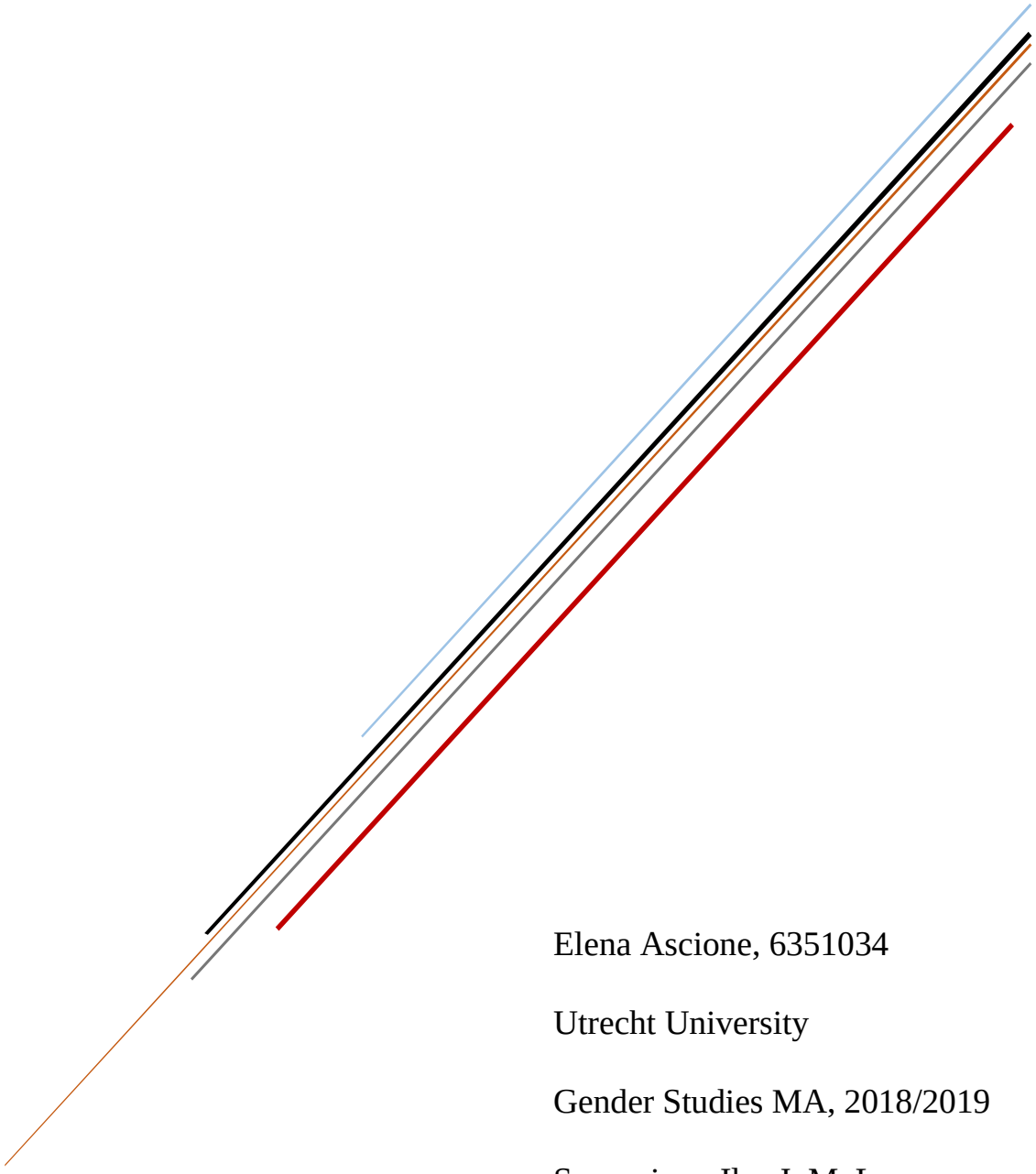
Fragments of Resistance:

Instances of Contemporary Art Exposing and Subverting Biopower



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Introduction

> *An example of the many unspoken, inner workings of dissertations and research papers is that the introduction is, dare I say, usually the last thing to be written. It so happens that as I write this, a significant part of my thesis is done, black on white, already too fixed and already too exposed than what feels comfortable for me.*

I started this research wanting to investigate the intersections of biopower and artistic practice to imagine different ways to expose and resist statistical and normative violence in situated, embodied and affective practices. It became also a work of self-analysis and deconstruction of the process of thesis writing itself, almost mirroring the deconstruction of the invisible workings of bio-regulatory mechanisms by means of two case studies, examples of contemporary art dealing with biopower and attempting, each in their own way, to propose a collective approach to the struggle of the contemporary.

I am interested in the work of contemporary art practitioners as forms of knowledge production that go beyond disciplinary boarders and cultivate networks of resistance to the system of control and oppression of biopower, for I believe that the heterogeneity of contemporary art and its general tendency to break boundaries and seek alliances across fields – collectivity over individuality – renders it a unique place of enunciation of possibilities for alternative futures and ways of existing together in the world. Thus, my research question is: what is the potential of contemporary art to expose and resist the regulatory mechanisms and practices of biopower?

The importance of art and its advantage over metadiscoursal attempts to understand the world has already been stated by many feminist thinkers; Rosi Braidotti, for one, writes,

> "There is no question that the creative spirits have a head start over the masters of meta discourse, even and especially of deconstructive meta discourse. This is a very sobering prospect: after years of post-structuralist theoretical arrogance, philosophy lags behind art and fiction in the difficult struggle to keep up with today's world."[1]

However, my query is framed in the specific context of the crisis of the contemporary. In his *Prison Notebooks* circa 1930, Antonio Gramsci wrote, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety

[1] Rosi Braidotti, 'Cyberfeminism with a Difference', *Disability Studies in Nederland*, 1996.

of morbid symptoms appear"[2]. The old is hovering to the point of death, but it is not quite dead yet; the new cannot be born until the old has died. These two parallel processes create a tension in which time itself is cancelled: there is no future, no present, but a constant fight in which a myriad of unresolved conflicts and histories are screaming to come to the surface.

Marina Garcès calls it "the conditio posthuma", or the time of being out of time that "looms over us today as the imposition of a new narrative, unique and linear: that of the irreversible destruction of our conditions of life"[3]. In this context, contemporary artistic practices address the relationship between art, life, and politics, and propose exceptional connections and intersections of knowledges.

In light of these considerations, one of the most interesting prerogatives of Michel Foucault's work, on which this dissertation relies for a theoretical framing of biopower, is not to have compared life and politics but to have conceptualised them as milieus impossible to be thought outside of their reciprocal relationship.[4] Thinking about biopower and contemporary art thus implies addressing subject-object relationships in a different way. It means to assume that the artwork is not simply an object produced by subjects, but that biological life lies beneath the whole process and that the art world has become a privileged surface to highlight the state of the contemporary human, i.e. the condition of precarity that is brought on by this time of crisis.

I will address these topics through a comparative analysis of two case studies of contemporary art: Forensic Architecture, a collaborative project stemmed from Goldsmith University in London, with a focus on their partnership with artist and audio investigator Lawrence Abu Hamdan; and the immersive theatrical performance *Thicker Than Blood* by independent curator and artist Izdihar Afyouni. Both projects are bound together by their propensity for imagining new ways of producing knowledge and making politics in common in an attempt to resist biopower's micromanagements of bodies and populations. I chose to read the case studies through the lenses of two main theoretical tools: Donna Haraway's

[2] Antonio Gramsci quoted in Zygmunt Bauman, 'Times of Interregnum', in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989* (Utrecht, Cambridge: BAK basis voor actuele kunst, The MIT Press, 2016), 203–11.
[3] Marina Garcés, 'Conditio Posthuma', *The Great Regression* (blog), 18 May 2017, http://www.thegreatregression.eu/conditio-posthuma/.
[4] Natalia Taccetta, 'Imagen y Subjetividad. Aproximaciones a La Dimensión Biopolítica Del Arte', 2014, https://www.academia.edu/7302957/Imagen_y_subjetividad._Aproximaciones_a_la_dimensi%C3%B3n_biopol%C3%ADtica_del_arte.

"situated knowledge"[5] and Luce Irigaray's "mimesis"[6] as possible instruments for resistance to the invisible pervasiveness of biopower.

Chapter one provides the theoretical framework for the two macro-areas of concern, biopower and contemporary art, in order to delimit the usage of these terminologies and thus establish a base on which to build the dissertation. Chapter two focuses on a close reading of the case studies through the lens of the theoretical tools of situated knowledge and the concept of collectivity. Chapter three turns to the Irigaraian concept of mimesis and the ways in which giving flesh to biopower is made possible and becomes a form of resistance to it.

In this time of crisis, of interregnum, a time when we have collectively embodied the figure of the enjambment - the suspension at the end of the line of a poem, waiting to be connected to the next line - I found answers in the fragmented indisciplinarity that projects such as Forensic Architecture or *Thicker Than Blood* propose. I suggest looking at un-expected alliances between disciplines, people, spaces and communities to propose new imaginaries and new worlds looking at art, politics, poetry, and justice.

> *This is not a posthumanist work, although I write with posthumanism in mind. This is not a new-materialist work, although I write with it in mind – barely to be honest. This is a work very much attached and interested in humans, their actions and consequences, not with the conscious aim of reinforcing a frankly dated and much debated androcentrism, but because today, right now, as I write and as you read, the very humanity of some is being put into question, again. Because as much as I am stimulated by intellectual exercises, this is not the time to focus all energies exclusively on them. They remain undoubtedly necessary, but I want to take a step back and use this space to discuss about flesh, blood, politics, representation and resistance.*

[5] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (n.d.): 575–99.
[6] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

Chapter one: Methodology and Framework

Methodology

The choices I made in regards to methodology are equally shaped by institutional demands and by my resistance to them.[7] I decided to focus on form as much as content; hence, following the teaching of Laurel Richardson, I practiced "writing as a method of enquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic"[8] in an attempt to resist the "chronic passivity"[9] of qualitative studies that renders them, at times, a bad mimicking of the so called "hard sciences" and, ultimately, a very tedious read. Qualitative research has to be read, and, I believe, has to be enjoyed even.

Thus the importance of writing as a methodology in itself, that goes against the idea of an organised, outlined, immanent plan that precedes the writing itself; in this research the writing is part of the process as a vibrant, creative, and unpredictable component.

Writing as a way of discovering the world – and thus the research – can be a very fragmented methodology. Hence, my choice of turning fragmentation into a creative methodology that accounts for the hybridity and complexity of the intersections between biopolitics and contemporary art and the proposal of new modes of resistance within those intersections. Fragmentation, the breaking into separate parts of something, holds space for breathing and thus for the imagining of possibilities between the lines of a research. Traditionally associated with a rather negative connotation of interruption, lack of cohesion and disorder, I want to reclaim fragmentation as an interesting methodology that could let us imagine writing and structure differently.

In line with this desire, I chose to scatter thorough the thesis fragments of thoughts narrated in first person with the aim of affirmatively critiquing the very process of writing a dissertation and in doing so, situating myself within it. As a result, the intermezzos try to be a parallel narration, to some extent juxtaposed to the main one, unveiling the personal, embodied, behind-the-scenes process of doing feminist research going beyond the criticism of existing techniques and presenting how existing techniques can be constraining and limiting through the proposal of an alternative.

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[7] Caroline Ramazanoglu, *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices* (SAGE Publications, 2002).
[8] Laurel Richardson, 'Writing - A Method of Inquiry', in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Second (SagePublications, Inc, 2000).
[9] Richardson.

I proceeded according to a thematic close reading of the case studies acknowledging and even embracing the further fragmentation that resulted from my inability to experience either of the art works physically when they were presented to the public – lacking thus a global, personal experience of them. My only ever experience of them was through their fragmented representation online, in the official websites of the artists and collectives principally, but also across a myriad of other secondary sources, people's accounts of their own experiences of them, articles, interviews and such. Common, recurring themes are the red thread running through the analysis of the case studies showing how fragmentation and unity must not always be in binary opposition.

Alongside fragmentation and writing as a method of enquiry, I chose to read the case studies through a comparative, feminist, qualitative analysis because it is a non-hierarchical, diffractive[10], and interactive approach that best suits an attempt to contrast regulatory mechanisms of biopower that are based on ubiquitous silence.

Ultimately, I aimed to let the writing guide the research and thus let the research be as embedded in my experience of it as possible to try to affirmatively question the practice of dissertation writing vis a vis the urgency of living.

> *I've been thinking about bisexuality and polyamory more than usual, reflecting on the implications of choices, not fitting in, invisibility, and continuous identity crises. Mostly, I've been wondering whether I have somehow turned them into a methodology for experiencing the world and, consequentially, for writing this thesis. My political views, my personal relationships, my academic career seem to revolve around fragmentation, multiple perspectives, the rejection of imposed choices and systems, never truly feeling at home anywhere. I am fascinated by ways of imagining and doing things differently. I thrive in shades of grey, in the in-between spaces. I thrive in openness; I find it's where the best ideas and the best people are. Bisexuality, fragmentation and un-definition, borderlines as a choice, they all come at the price of exactly the things they promise. There is beauty, possibility – and a whole lot of privilege- in the indefinite, as well as invisibility, difficulties and loneliness – personally, politically, and institutionally. One of the few things I remember in Latin is "In medio stat virtus". Virtue stands in the middle. Then again, as soon as I consider that, it sounds like the perfect justification for centrist political nonsense. As I said, continuous identity crises. Is that where growth comes from?*

[10] Diffraction is an "optical metaphor" conceptualised by Haraway and juxtaposes to reflection as a critical methodology. Whereas reflection produces reflexivity and thus reproduces 'the same' but elsewhere, diffraction looks at the production of patterns of difference. Donna Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York, London: Routledge, 1997).

Framework: An outline of biopower

In 1976[11], Michel Foucault concluded the first volume of *History of Sexuality* with a very provocative chapter titled "Right of death and power over life" that begins with the following sentence: "For a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death"[12]. Classical liberalism - Foucault's starting point - originating from eighteenth century social contract theory[13], conceives of power as "sovereign power", as the "power over death" exercised originally by the "pater familias" in classical age – the Roman law of "patria potestas"- and then by the monarchy.

However, Foucault contended, throughout the eighteenth century, there is a rupture with the previous efforts to attribute political processes and structures to biological determinants as traditional juridical theorizations of power do not capture the pervasive ways in which power functions[14]. Since the classical age, the Western world has experienced radical changes in the exercise of power and, as Foucault writes, "deduction has tended to be no longer the major form of power but merely one element among others, working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it"[15].

In contrast to classical liberalism, neoliberalism – "a globally integrated 'operating system' of socioeconomic domination by a state-business power nexus directing the reorganization of markets, states, populations, and social goods toward intensifying the concentration of capital accumulation"[16] – makes use of what Foucault theorises as "biopower",

> "A power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death…a power whose task is to take charge of life need[ing] continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms….Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendour"[17].

Biopower, proposes Foucault, is twofold: it actualises itself through disciplinary power, which focuses on the "anatomo-politics" of individual bodies with the aim of surveilling,

[11] 1978 for the English translation.
[12] Michel Foucault, 'Right of Death and Power over Life', in *History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books New York, 1978).
[13] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (1651); John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, (1689); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin* and *Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, (1755).
[14] Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, trans. Eric Frederick Trump (New York University Press, 2011).
[15] Foucault, 'Right of Death and Power over Life'.
[16] Suhail Malik, 'When Is Contemporary Art?', in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989* (Utrecht, Cambridge: BAK basis voor actuele kunst, The MIT Press, 2016), 127–37.
[17] Foucault, 'Right of Death and Power over Life'.

disciplining, and integrating towards efficiency; and, developing itself somewhat later, "a biopolitics of populations", a regulatory approach towards the mechanisms of life. These two mechanisms of biopower do not exist on the same level, and thus are not mutually exclusive. However, forty years have passed since the first theorization of these concepts. Foucault introduced them during his lectures at the Collège de France in 1975-76 and was very punctual about the phenomena he was intending to investigate – the issue of race, environmental changes, birth rates, morbidity rates, etc. [18] .

As relevant as the aforementioned issues remain as macro-phenomena, it would be naïve not to consider the changes that took place from the milieu in which Foucault carried out his analyses, until today. The concept of biopower was neither allegoric nor a-historical, but it was rooted in contextual, historical analysis. Following, I will give a brief overview of the main critiques and more recent re-elaborations of Foucault's theorisations in regards to biopower.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, Foucault's contemporary, in a short speculative essay titled *Postscript on the societies of control* (1992), commented on Foucault's model of 'disciplinary societies' characteristic of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century, noting the current crisis of such model. Societies of control are replacing disciplinary societies. In Deleuze's own words:

> "Just as the corporation replaces the factory, *perpetual training* tends to replace the *school*, and continuous control to replace the examination….In the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything."[19]

Foucault defined 'disciplinary societies' as those in which the individual's life is enclosed in fixed environments that make up the social arena, such as the school, the hospital, the factory, the asylum. Deleuze asserts, however, that society has moved past such static theorization towards a more fluid and fluctuating network of control of human life.

As Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (2006) discuss in their paper on biopolitics today, such a model has been taken up by post-Marxist philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio

[18] Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, 'Biopower Today', *BioSocieties*, no. 1 (2006): 195–217.
[19] Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3–7.

Negri in *Empire* (2000), when they define biopower as being "expressed as a control that extends throughout the depths of the consciousness and bodies of the population"[20].

Hard and Negri's approach to biopower as presented by Rabinow and Rose is quite antithetical to Foucault's initial theorization: biopower is a vague, all-encompassing terminology that functions through the extraction of 'surplus value' from life – a strong Marxist reading of the concept – in order to assure the dominion of the 'Empire', which is a "global form of domination"[21]. Biopower, according to Negri and Hardt, is implemented by multinational and transnational corporations, which, since the 1950s, have been hegemonic in their configuration of global territories. The final strike seems to be the conclusive turn to Christianity as a possible resistance to the Empire.

This theorization of biopower, comment Rabinow and Rose, is incompatible with that proposed by Foucault primarily because they believe "the concept is emptied of its critical force – it can describe everything but analyse nothing"[22], but also because, according to Foucault, biopower does not support a single dominant group – as Hardt and Negri instead seem to suggest through the example of multi/transnational corporations. While Foucault might have initially attributed biopower to the workings of nation-states, he then acknowledged that "the great overall regulations that proliferated throughout the nineteenth century…are also found at the sub-State level, in a whole series of sub-State institutes"[23].

A further theorization of biopower is offered by influential Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In a series of books exploring the matter titled *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), he distances himself from Foucault's distinction between sovereign power and biopower, arguing that sovereign power is always already biopolitical, since the domination over bare life (zoē[24]) has constantly been the ultimate aim of the political order. Through this conceptualisation of biopower Agamben identifies the Holocaust as the ultimate representation of biopolitical configurations in modern times by stating that Nazi

[20] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000).
[21] Rabinow and Rose, 'Biopower Today'.
[22] Rabinow and Rose.
[23] Michel Foucault, '17 March 1976', in *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, Picador, 2003, 336.
[24] "Declarations of rights represent the originary figure of the inscription of natural life in the juridico-political order of the nation-state. The same bare life that in the ancien régime was politically neutral and belonged to God as creaturely life and in the classical world was (at least apparently) dearly distinguished as zoē from political life (bios) now fully enters into the structure of the state and even becomes the earthly foundation of the state's legitimacy and sovereignty." Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1995).

concentration camps are symbolic places where life is reduced to "zoē", to "bare life". As scholar Thomas Lemke writes in his introduction to biopolitics,

> "Agamben sees in the camp the hidden matrix of the political domain, and he wants to make visible the underlying logic in order to better conceive the present political constellation."[25]

Rabinow and Rose's commentary of Agamben's approach is that such an interpretation of biopolitics as "the politics of the State modelled on the figure of the Sovereign, and of all forms of biopolitical authority as agents of that Sovereign, suits the twentieth-century absolutisms of the Nazis and Stalin"[26]. However, they note, that is also a heavily contextual account of power, whereas a more nuanced conceptualisation is needed.

Moving from critique to affirmative critique, Rabinow and Rose list three areas of interest for the "biopolitical lines of force active today"[27]: race, reproduction, and genomic medicine, all tied together by the new molecular technological advances. The success of the molecular gaze at the turn of the new century had allowed, for a brief moment, for what seemed to be the end of biological racism and even specism with the discovery that humans share over 98 per cent of their genome with chimpanzees and that any two randomly chosen individuals will have a quasi-identical DNA sequence (99.9 per cent). However, out of genomic thinking, a new molecular conceptualisation of race has then emerged with the finding of significant differences at the level of the single DNA base. This made way, once again, to new ways of systematically discriminate on the basis of race and gender.

Exactly this new microscopic, molecular gaze and the technologies granting its existence are part of the critique initiated by Donna Haraway towards the verbatim application of Foucaultian models of power today. Haraway's theorisations[28] on objectivity and power dynamics surrounding knowledge production highlighting partial perspective and situated knowledges have been a fundamental asset for the meta-discourse on power and biopower.

She claims that the world mapped by Foucault's biopower is no more and has transformed into the age of "informatics of domination"[29], a thinking that underlines the

[25] Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*.
[26] Rabinow and Rose, 'Biopower Today'.
[27] Rabinow and Rose.
[28] Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'.
[29] Donna J. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (Routledge, 1991); as quoted in Rosi Braidotti, 'The Inhuman: Life beyond Death', in *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2013), 105–42.

importance of what Rosi Braidotti (2013) calls the "new system of population control", or mass-scale data farming. In her own words,

> "The bio-genetic structure of advanced capitalism reduces bodies to carriers of vital information, which get invested with financial value and capitalized. They provide the material for new classifications of entire populations on the basis of the genetic predispositions and vital capacities for self-organization….This kind of population control goes beyond Foucault's analysis of the bio-political, as it does not function by techniques of discipline and control, but rather by bio-genetic farming of data."[30]

While the notions of biopower, disciplinary power, and biopolitics are difficult to delineate, their meanings contextually shaped, easily overlapping, and at times contradicting, the notion of "normalization" seems to touch upon all of them. In light of this consideration, normalisation becomes a fascinating operational tool of power necessary for a discussion on contemporary biopolitics.

The concept of normalisation commonly used in contemporary studies often derives from Foucault's theorizations of power and Western governance. In *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974-1975*, Foucault asserted that only one element cuts across both disciplinary power and regulatory power, with a potential application to individual bodies and populations alike: the norm.

Norms, according to Foucault, operate not through exclusion and expulsion but through a much more productive mechanism of intervention and transformation aimed towards the correction, the regularisation of an individual, a body, and a trend of a population to fit the norm again. Catherine Mills in a monograph on the subject titled *Futures of Reproduction* (2011), writes,

> "Norms are mobilised to regularise individuals in relation to each other and in reference to a standard as a means of control and political subjection. In general terms, normalisation refers to a mode or practice of power that centres on the *norm* in contrast to the rule of law."[31]

Thus, in line with Foucault's writings, the mode by which law operates is the norm. Indeed, in a normalising society, not only norms become the way in which the law functions, but also they allow the State to "govern at a distance" through an archipelago of non-state institutions. In Foucault's own words,

[30] Braidotti, 'The Inhuman: Life beyond Death'.
[31] Catherine Mills, 'What Is Normalization?', in *Futures of Reproduction* (Springer Science+Business Media, 2011).

> "In a biopolitical society, norms allow the law to operate in conjunction with a series of increasingly regulatory apparatuses such as medicine. In doing so, norms permit the law unprecedented access to individual bodies, allowing it to act as a continuous regulatory force rather than an occasional, prohibitive instrument of sovereign right."[32]

Furthermore, Foucault's account of normalisation touches upon the matter of individual choice, presenting it as normatively constrained: in a normative society, norms operate to shape individuals' ethical, political, social and bodily realities, a fact that consequently implies that decisions are taken in a normative environment that always already decides the limit of normal and ab-normal.[33]

In this complex picture of the ways in which power operates today, the intervention of contemporary art and its intersections with power and biopower is significant. Thus, the second half of the chapter is dedicated to the delineation of the theoretical framework for contemporary art, focusing on the perception of shapelessness, its entanglement with histories of colonialism and its co-dependent relationship with neoliberalism, and the question of which contemporalities does contemporary art address.

> *I listened to a podcast this morning, while I was preparing breakfast. Sara Ahmed was discussing working on University instead of in it. I look at the way this dissertation is taking shape and it feels like a parody of something. Of the style, the rules, and the conventions that throughout the years I learnt and that have allowed me to participate in the game of academia. You have an argument, you have a methodology, you have a body of references which together allow you to develop your ideas but which become, also, incredibly constraining. Sometimes, we need to unlearn, Ahmed says. Loosen, untangle, deviate, DISOBEY.*

Framework: An outline of contemporary art

The notion of contemporary art and its politics have been an interesting arena of debate for scholars, curators, art institutions, and artists. Well-established journals in the field such as *e-flux* – a monthly art publication – have dedicated a variety of issues on the topic. The dissent on what contemporary art is, when it is, and what it will become, is widespread. However, one shared belief is that, as artist and cultural researcher Marion von Osten writes,

[32] Mills.
[33] Mills.

"Contemporary art has become somehow shapeless due to the wide variety of global practices that are all grouped under the term."[34]

The perception of shapelessness attributed to contemporary art surely reflects on the difficulty in neatly defining what contemporary art is. Some point to the dissipation of borders between artistic practice and social and educational turns; others consider contemporary art to be an agent of the neoliberal economic system and thus implicated in violent schemes of colonialism and exclusion with capitalist goals. Some others would also use this blanket term to cluster underneath it the loss of boundaries between art and politics, art and popular culture, and any sort of formalism related to the methodologies of contemporary art[35].

However seemingly all encompassing the previous statements appear, it is necessary to acknowledge that, as von Osten reminds her readers, almost all the debates mentioned focus on the Western art market and its Western actors. The lack of situatedness of these debates and claims perpetrates the hegemony of the West on the rest of the (art) world, a hegemony that translates itself also in broader damaging discourses on Western art canons as more visible and more relevant in regards to contemporary art practices. This "paternalistic view on non-European art"[36] cannot be ignored when talking about contemporary art.

The idea of decentring European and American hegemonic paradigms in relation to the art world is also paralleled by equally contemporary debates on decolonising knowledge and academia[37]. In this sense, von Osten believes, the critique of the division of disciplines surrounding Western knowledge production methods encompasses both the academic and the art world and brings into light the urgency to acknowledge and act upon the entanglement with colonialism and histories of exclusion. She writes, "Thus, the dissolution of boundaries in contemporary arts discourse could also be read as an awakening from a long sleep"[38], for there is potential in imaging and proposing to do academia and art practices otherwise, beyond boundaries.

[34] Marion von Osten, 'The End of Contemporary Art (as We Know It)', in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989* (Utrecht, Cambridge: BAK basis voor actuele kunst, The MIT Press, 2016), 67–79.
[35] von Osten.
[36] von Osten.
[37] Exemplified by the works of scholar Achille Mbembe. Achille Mbembe, *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive* (2015)
[38] von Osten, 'The End of Contemporary Art (as We Know It)'.

But *when* is contemporary art? Suhail Malik, co-director of the MFA Fine Art program at Goldsmiths in London, wrote about this seemingly redundant question. As the word itself says, contemporary art is contemporary. In his own words,

> "But such an apparently straightforward question brings with it two sets of complications: one with regard to the contemporaneity of contemporary art, the other with regard to the standard intractable puzzles of the metaphysics of time – essentially the now is always passing away, yet always (the) present."[39]

However, as Malik argues, the appearance of contemporary art has a specific calendric date and is historically and locally circumscribable to American and West-European art centres in the 1960s. To be more specific, he identifies three key moments for the establishment of contemporary art as the now universally accepted dominant mode of art. First, the post-World War II US dominance over the Western bloc; second, the geopolitical shift from the Cold War to the trans-national market key to globalization; and third, the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.

The third moment, according to Malik, represents the "official" inauguration of the current predominant power configuration – neoliberalism – to which contemporary art systematically contributes through a plethora of mechanisms: gallery revenues causing a market super-concentration; high-end concentration in terms of reputation and prestige; and high path dependence[40].

Cutting itself loose from the medium-specific, formalist, and "increasingly puritanical"[41] precepts of modern art, from the 1960s contemporary art has made its mission to be "of its time in the broadest sense". As Malik writes,

> "Distinct from both Classicism and modernism, CA [contemporary art] is adequate to both the historical specificity of each of its instances and also as a category, to the contingently determined multiplicity of the here and now in its open and plural diversity."[42]

This tension between the specificity of the here and now of time and the indeterminacy of contemporary art makes evident the interest in re-thinking the initial question, "when is contemporary art?" from a more metaphysical perspective.

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[39] Suhail Malik, 'When Is Contemporary Art?', in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989*, (Utrecht, Cambridge: BAK basis voor actuele kunst, The MIT Press, 2016), 127-137.
[40] High path dependence is a concept familiar to social sciences, which, in the specific case of the art world, indicates that an artist starting in the top end of the sector will most likely remain in the top end, and an artist starting in the bottom end is likely to remain there, with some slight chances of climbing up.
[41] Malik, 'When Is Contemporary Art?'
[42] Malik.

According to Malik the issue is rooted in contemporary art's indeterminacy; contemporary art overcomes the narrow formalism of modernist approaches to reach an "ultrafromalism"[43]. Time, however, is anything but above formalisms. Time's formalism is essential to distinguish one moment from another, to establish a "chronoschematics" to ordinarily arrange what happens in a - commonly Western- linearly perceived succession, so that one moment is not exchangeable with another.

Contrary, contemporary art's ultraformalism rejects such linear determinations. "What is primary for CA as an experience – and what is codified by designating it as an ultraformalism – is that each new experience generatively *adds to* and embellishes experience as a whole."[44]

Malik ends by saying that the "contemporary" in contemporary art designates a maintained experience of the new that arises thanks to the constitutive indeterminacy that so deeply characterises contemporary art. Thus, while it still relies on chronoschematics to distinguish one moment from a new moment, its ultraformalism allows for the fading of borders of the linear now. In his own words,

> "In short, CA's contemporaneity cannot be identified with the contemporaneity of a *when* determined by chronoschematics. Despite their lexical commonality, there is a diremption between the contemporary qua category of CA and qua fact of time. To be clear: it is not that CA's ultraformalism eliminates time altogether. Rather, the *when* of CA…is manifest and has salience only on the basis of the *continuity* of the experience of the new, rather than the inexorable serialised demarcations of the chronoschematic now."[45]

In summary, contemporary art's two constitutive elements, according to Malik, are "the primacy of its interpretively incomplete experience and its 'anythingness'". Moreover, whereas there certainly is potential in shapelessness to elude and escape regulatory mechanisms such as those of biopower and neoliberal economy, the workings of contemporary art itself, its biases and complicities, seem to be a blind spot of much contemporary art production.

German filmmaker, visual artist and writer Hito Steyerl denounces exactly this issue in a paper she wrote for *e-flux journal* in 2010. Steyerl is changing how we think about art and politics and about the relationship between the two in an age of un-representable people and

[43] Malik.
[44] Malik.
[45] Malik.

overpopulation of images and she starts doing so through prioritising the discussion on the politics of art before looking at art as politics. In her own words,

> "If contemporary art is the answer, the question is: How can capitalism be made more beautiful?"[46]

Contemporary art, she argues, does not take place in an ivory tower, separated from and above of our messy worldly happenings; it lives, in fact, in the "neoliberal thick of things". As Suhail Malik argued previously, Steyerl highlights the deep interconnectedness of art with the capitalist machine exemplified by the massive redistribution of wealth on which contemporary art feeds,

> "Art…facilitates the development of a new multipolar distribution of geopolitical power whose predatory economies are often fuelled by internal oppression, class war from above, and radical shock and awe policies….It pollutes, gentrifies, and ravishes. It seduces and consumes, then suddenly walks off, breaking your heart."[47]

It thrives on "accelerated exploitation," as Steyerl names it, on the back of a workforce that does not match any traditional theorization of labour but that is constantly working, between interns and precarious, self-damaging employees, rapidly becoming one of the most unpaid labour-based industries second only to domestic and care work[48]. In doing so, contemporary art answers to the dogma of what Stefano Harney, Professor of Strategic Management Education at Singapore Management University, has named "algorithmic institutions" which "fit a pattern, the pattern of logistical capitalism, access at speed – to our labour, to our mood, to our future."[49] Access at speed, accelerated exploitation, the revealed dogma of contemporary art practices.

On account of the neoliberal economy of which contemporary art is an agent, the process of the institutionalisation of contemporary art has altered the material conditions of artists and curators dramatically[50]. The proliferation of museums, galleries, various art-institutions, biennials, and such has brought on a new series of "irreducible ambivalence[s]"[51] in the relation between art and its politics, writes Athena Athanasiou, a social anthropologist

[46] Hito Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy', *e-flux journal*, no. 21 (December 2010).
[47] Steyerl.
[48] Steyerl.
[49] Stefano Harney, 'The New Rules of Algorithmic Institutions', in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989* (BAK basis voor actuele kunst, The MIT Press, 2016), 447–57.
[50] von Osten, 'The End of Contemporary Art (as We Know It)'.
[51] Athena Athanasiou, 'Performing the Institution "as If It Were Possible"', in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989* (BAK basis voor actuele kunst, The MIT Press, 2016), 679–91.

and professor at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences in Athens. She carries on arguing that,

> "As they determine and regulate livability, they also compromise or negate the sustainability of certain modes of life….To put it bluntly, institutions sustain us and wipe us out at the same time."[52]

The condition of precarity that surrounds contemporary art practice has inevitably shaped its content. However, going back to Steyerl's critique, there seems to be an implicit taboo in discussing the precarity of conditions of contemporary art making itself. In Steyerl's own words,

> "Here's the bad news: political art routinely shies away from discussing all these matters. Addressing the intrinsic conditions of the art field, as well as the blatant corruption within it…is a taboo even on the agenda of most artists who consider themselves political."[53]

As Athanasiou anticipated – and against the framework of institutionalised processes that render bodies disposable, that exclude and violently use and abuse – there is a renewed need for an institutional critique that goes beyond the 1960s focus on art institutions and, taking into account the legacy of that movement, analyses the inter-connections between economic systems, contemporary culture, and the intricate post-democratic society that Steyerl outlines. Especially since, as Steyerl explained, today the phenomenon is much more common and spread out than it was in the 1960s, and "radical art is…very often sponsored by the most predatory banks or arms traders and completely embedded in rhetorics of city marketing, branding, and social engineering."[54]

However hopeless the picture of contemporary art and its politics might appear, however impossible it might seem to imagine art otherwise, there is still great potential, a simmering possibility for change in spite of its ambiguities and conflicts on the one hand, and precisely because of them on the other. In Steyerl's words,

> "The art field is a space of wild contradiction and phenomenal exploitation. It is a place of power mongering, speculation, financial engineering, and massive and crooked manipulation. But it is also a site of commonality, movement, energy, and desire. In its best iterations it is a terrific cosmopolitan arena populated by mobile shock workers, itinerant salesmen of self, tech whiz kids, budget

[52] Athanasiou.
[53] Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy'.
[54] Steyerl.

> tricksters, supersonic translators, PhD interns, and other digital vagrants and day laborers….It's HDMI, CMYK, LGBT. Pretentious, flirtatious, mesmerizing."[55]

Contemporary art's shapelessness and contradictions allow it to be a privileged realm in which the possibility to think "otherwise" takes place. Fragmentation becomes then not only a concept but also creative methodology. In the contemporary struggle to create assemblages of anti-racism, anti-specism, anti-capitalism, feminism, and queerness, to be able to conceive of art and politics as being part of each other is exciting and full of potential.

> *I don't know why we suffer from a collective obsession with unity, with decision. Why can't I hold a myriad of fragments within me, separate but in dialogue with each other, creating a vortex of colours so beautiful every time I look at it I discover something new? Must I give up this kaleidoscope of experiences to make up a fictitious unified single truth about myself? Fragmentation, the beauty of holding multiple truths within yourself.*

[55] Steyerl.

Chapter two: Investigating Truth

In this chapter, I will discuss the two case studies, their fragmented yet connected histories and creations. As anticipated in the introduction, I found similarities not only in how they propose subversions to biopower but also, on a meta-level, in their interweaving of feminist theory and feminist practice to answer the urgencies of living in the time of crisis of the contemporary. An overarching question about the possibility of justice reworking the meaning of truth and knowledge fuels this section of the thesis.

Forensic Architecture

Forensic Architecture is a research project and investigative agency based at Goldsmith University, London, working in the in-between spaces of art, activism, architecture, science, and advocacy. Professor of Spatial and Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths Eyeal Weizman started the project in 2010 with the help of a grant by the European Research Council (ERC).

The agency examines cases of human rights violations, state and corporate violence, and environmental devastation in the interest of communities and individuals, human rights organisations, media and activist groups. Its ultimate aim is helping uncover public justice in a time – or a place - of crisis when this is rendered difficult of even impossible.

The word 'forensics' derives from Latin 'forensis', meaning that which pertains to the forum, i.e. judicial activity and those who partake in it. However, the Roman forum was a multi-layered space of intersections between politics, law, economy, and social life, in which people came together. Today, forensics has come to designate something else, decisively shifting towards the realm of law and or medicine, and is mobilized by nation states as part of an array of surveilling mechanisms to police and govern individuals. The Museum of contemporary art in Barcelona has written about the collective,

> "By returning to the wider concept of forensis, Forensic Architecture seeks to unlock the potential of forensics as a counter-political practice. Inverting the direction of the forensic gaze, it seeks to designate a field of action in which individuals and independent organisations can confront abuses of power by states and corporations in situations that have a bearing upon political struggle, violent conflict and climate change."[56]

[56] MACBA: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 'Forensic Architecture: Towards an Investigative Aesthetics' (MACBA, 19 April 2017), https://www.macba.cat/uploads/20170419/Full_Forensic_ENG_19.04.17.pdf.

Interdisciplinarity is at the core of the agency, and one of the multiple ways in which it is present is the multitalented team of people working for Forensic Architecture, composed of lawyers, filmmakers, scientists, curators, artists, architects, and journalists. However, interdisciplinarity as a term would be only partially correct to describe the work of Weizman's group: the aim of the agency is, amongst others, that of offering a transformative way of producing knowledge, proceeding via intersections and creating something similar to a 'supra-disciplinarity' or even a 'indisciplinarity' of sorts, irreducible to a category. In Weizman's own words,

> "The story will never be caught within one image or one bit of video alone. It exists in the relation between those various sources, in cross-referencing them."[57]

Mobilising as a strategy Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge"[58], the paradoxical claim made here is that partiality is the only form of objectivity: a strongly objective knowledge is a knowledge produced by a specific, embodied position. This epistemological claim shifts the attention from one singular truth to many partial ones that are constantly fluctuating and reassembling themselves. The systematic cross-referencing of Forensic Architecture, together with its collaborative and intersectional essence, thus creates feminist, grounded, partial truths and kinships. By following the reorganization of matter across a terrain or by virtually mapping the architectural stage of an event, fragmentation and kaleidoscopic frameworks emerge as central to Forensic Architecture's work.

Hence, a red thread surfaces, connecting situated knowledges and "public truth", a concept proposed by Weizman[59]. What this means is that Forensic Architecture takes a conceptual approach to legal issues that focuses on a truth that is always already political but non-hegemonic. By bringing science and conflict studies into the public arena, speaking in non-technical terms and in multiple languages – multi-language options are sometimes available in the videos of Forensic Architecture – the truth becomes accessible, transparent. Public truth is embedded in agential actors' experiences and not built on the passivity of 'othered' objects of study.

Public truth and situated knowledge are diffractive readings of the same concept of embodied and partial objectivity, which Forensic Architecture mobilises in the complex

[57] Amnesty International and Eyal Weizman, How do they do it? Forensic Architecture, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJXurE1EQ9g.
[58] Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'.
[59] Eyal Weizman, *Propositions #7/1: Counter Forensics*, Propositions for Non-Fascist Living (BAK basis voor actuele kunst, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7__KXWkHUP8.

theatre of the legal forum and beyond. The always ongoing process of verification that Forensic Architecture stands for and the very idea of public truth not only makes us re-think the perceived immanence of the concept of justice in a productive, interesting way, but also calls for a continuous commitment that renders public truth accountable and responsible. In the current post-truth era[60], against the attacks on the possibility to collectively perceive what is truth – fertile ground for fascisms to rule – public truth calls for engagement with an array of forums that surpass traditional confines. The 'forensis' of Forensic Architecture arises through the meshing of perspectives; it brings science into conflict and into performance, making it political. As Haraway reminds us:

> "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see."[61]

In the context of boundary crossing characteristic of Forensic Architecture and the practice of public truth, curatorial practice is fundamental for the research process of the agency, since a significant part of the project is based on the presentation of the findings. As Weizman explains, "The stakes of forensic analysis thus exceed the space of the law",[62] and they move between international courts, United Nations, citizens' tribunals, alongside cultural institutions, art exhibitions, and seminars.

In the following part, I will zoom in on a case Forensic Architecture has been called to investigate on behalf of NGO Defence for Children International (DCI)[63] and relatives of the victims involved. The case is particularly relevant to my study because of the specific methodology used, i.e. a collaborative approach with the arts. In this instance, Forensic Architecture has worked in partnership with the artist and "audio investigator" Lawrence Abu Hamdan to verify or disprove, through sound analysis, the truthfulness of the claims that the Israeli military was making at the time of the killings of two Palestinian teenage boys, Nadeem Nawara and Mohammed Abu Daher. I will first give a recollection of the events as they have been narrated both by Forensic Architecture and by international newspapers and

[60] The condition of 'post truth' denotes a political culture in which evidence and verification processes lose importance in favour of personal belief and emotion.
[61] Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'.
[62] Eyal Weizman et al., 'Forensic Architecture', *Architectural Design: Post-Traumatic Urbanism* 80, no. 5 (28 September 2010): 58–63.
[63] NGO and grassroots movement initiated in 1979 on the United Nations' first Year of the Child. It aims to promote and protect the rights of children at both a regional level and an international one. The international secretariat is based in Geneva, Switzerland, and the organization has over thirty-five national sections spread across five continents. For more information visit: https://defenceforchildren.org/

news castings at the time. Afterward, I will delve into the key figure of Lawrence Abu Hamdan and his work.

The killing of Nadeem Nawara and Mohammed Abu Daher

The 15th of May 2014 was Nakba day, the 66th anniversary of the forced displacement of Palestinians by Zionist militia aimed at the foundation of the Israeli State in the aftermath of the Second World War. One-hundred-fifty Palestinians took part in the commemoration in the city of Beitunia, in the occupied West Bank, by demonstrating outside of Israeli Ofer Prison, where for six weeks over one-hundred young Palestinians had been on a hunger strike to protest against their detention without charges and under secret evidence. Following instances of stone throwing and burning of tires and garbage in the proximity of the prison, Israeli forces initiated riot dispersal protocols, which consist of tear gas canisters, stun grenades, and rubber bullets.[64]

That day, witnesses reported three shots being fired, each roughly an hour apart. Seventeen-year-old Nadeem Nawara and sixteen-year-old Mohammed Abu Daher were killed. The events took place in front of a small carpentry shop with a security camera, which captured the facts.

Despite the footage of the CCTV - to which another recording from a CNN camera and other activists' testimonies, who were present at the scene, were added to substantiate the claims - the Nakba day killings were denied by the Israeli military. Their first official statement was that the films were likely to have been modified as soldiers' standard ammunition at the time was rubber bullets exclusively.[65] The NGO Defend Children International and the parents of the victims called upon Forensic Architecture to investigate the deaths of Nadeem Nawara and Mohammad Abu Daher. Forensic Architecture recalled:

[64] Charlotte Silver, 'In Palestine and Israel, There Are No "Clashes"', *Aljazeera*, 21 May 2014, sec. Opinion,https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/05/palestine-israel-there-are-no-c-20145216272592121O.html; Peter Beaumont, 'Video Footage Indicates Killed Palestinian Youths Posed No Threat', *The Guardian*, 20 May 2014, sec. News, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/20/video-indicates-killed-palestinian-youths-no-threat-israeli-forces.

[65] *The Killing of Nadeem Nawara and Mohammed Abu Daher*, 2014, https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-killing-of-nadeem-nawara-and-mohammed-abu-daher.

> "What began as an attempt to identify the perpetrators of a double murder evolved to explore Israel's mechanisms of denial, and identified a chilling tactic employed by Israeli military police."[66]

The images of the CNN news report showed two soldiers aiming their rifles and shooting. After a meticulous synchronisation of the available footage and a 3D digital reconstruction of the space in which the killings took place, Forensic Architecture was able to prove not only the existence of a clear line of sight between soldiers and the boys, but also that only one of the soldiers could have taken the shot, thus incriminating twenty-one year-old Ben Deri, member of Israeli border police. The report shows Deri firing live ammunition and disguising it as anti-riot rubber coated bullets, despite the declarations of ballistic experts and Israeli military exponents[67].

However intertwined the fates of Nawara and Abu Daher are, for the sake of my analysis I would like to zoom in on the second killing. Forensic Architecture's records show how Mohammed Abu Daher was shot while walking home, unarmed, and facing away from the soldiers' location. This time, apart from the CCTV camera recording Abu Daher being hit and falling on the ground – the same security camera that had recorded the killing of Nawara – Palestinian cameras managed to distinctly record the sound of the shot being fired. By synchronising once again the footage from the security camera and the footage from the Palestinian news recording, it was possible to establish that the same shot – the lethal shot that killed Abu Daher – was being recorded.

In order to prove whether the shot fired was live ammunition or a rubber-coated steel bullet, Forensic Architecture collaborated with artist and audio investigator Lawrence Abu Hamdan. A detailed analysis of the acoustics was carried out through special techniques designed to visualise the sound frequencies of the bullets in order to determine the type of bullet used, and thus to judge whether there had been an attempt to disguise the fatal shots to

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[66] Forensic Architecture, 'The Killing of Nadeem Nawara and Mohammed Abu Daher', *Forensic Architecture* (blog), 20 November 2014, https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-killing-of-nadeem-nawara-and-mohammed-abu-daher.

[67] Nawara was indeed killed by live ammunition, states the report by Forensic Architecture, a fact that was initially concealed by the presence – caught on video - of an extension for standard rubber bullets that connects itself to the M16 issued to Israeli military. A careful video analysis of the security camera and the CNN recording showed that the soldier was aware of shooting live ammunition and then tried to cover his actions by pretending to operate the rifle according to the specific procedure for firing rubber-coated bullets: whereas the cartridge with live ammunition inserted into the rubber bullets extension is automatically expelled due to the increased pressure, with a rubber bullet the soldier needs to 'cock the gun' to expel the cartridge and reload. Looking carefully at the images it is possible to see Ben Deri firing the shot and, as he does that, the cartridge flying off the rifle in a small blurry pixel. However, immediately after that, the soldier cocks the gun, as if to expel the cartridge – already seen a few second before exiting the rifle - and reload.

make them sound as if they were rubber bullets. The sound analysis proved, by identifying its particular acoustic characteristics, that the shot in question was, without a doubt, live ammunition.

Furthermore, Abu Hamdan compared footage of the protesters' reactions to two warning shots recorded by news cameras versus the shot that killed Mohammed Abu Daher, showing how people who are continuously subjected to these types of sounds can thus instinctively distinguish the lethal shot from other sounds. At the sound of the first two shots, which Abu Hamdan proved to be rubber bullets, the crowd simply retroceded slightly; at the third shot – a steel bullet - protesters dropped to the ground or ducked for cover.

The news was released on the website of Defend Children International and was then picked up by numerous international newscasts. Israeli authorities could no longer deny their involvement in the Nakba day shootings and Ben Deri, the Israeli border police officer, was arrested. However, he was only charged with manslaughter – and not premeditative murder, as Forensic Architecture's findings demonstrated – and only for the death of Nadeem Nawara instead of being considered as a suspect of the killing of Muhammad Abu Daher as well.

Lawrence Abu Hamdan and *Earshot*: the sound of human rights violations

"What is the political role of sound?" is the guiding question that Lawrence Abu Hamdan asks in his work. Abu Hamdan is a British-Lebanese multimedia artist with a background in DIY music, which has granted him a special set of abilities in relation to the quality and the technicality of sound and sound making. The artist's forensic audio investigations are part of Forensic Architecture research project at Goldsmith University, where he is also a PhD graduate and associate lecturer.

Abu Hamdan is dedicated to understanding the role of voice in law and the changing nature of testimony in the face of new regimes of body control, algorithmic technologies, medical sciences, and technologies of eaves dropping. In a world where surveillance is ubiquitous but somehow imperceptible, he pushes for a re-thinking of modes of listening and of the boundaries put on voices and sounds. For Abu Hamdan, listening is a political act and a methodology that has structured, and could potentially continue to structure the way the law engages with cases.

Lawrence considers himself both an artist and an investigator. His research has been shown in galleries and museums as well as in courts of justice and advocacy reports. His work seems to navigate – much like Forensic Architecture – a plethora of forums, refusing boundaries and prospering at the intersections of things.

A year after his collaboration with Forensic Architecture, Abu Hamdan returned to the case of Nadeem Nawara and Muhammad Abu Daher for an exhibition commissioned by the contemporary art institute Portikus, in Frankfurt, Germany. The tile of the exhibition was *Earshot* and it revolved around the findings and materials of the initial case of Forensic Architecture in an array of prints, sounds, and a video.

The video constituted the main part of the exhibition. Based on the audio-ballistic analysis of the sounds of gunshots, it functioned as a tribunal for the murders that took place in 2014 by staging a hypothetical trial. The video was shot in an indoor shooting range where, instead of targets, prints of the evidence gathered in collaboration with Forensic Architecture moved up and down the tracks. The images presented were spectrograms, graphic representations of sound frequencies based on pitch, timing, and intensity. The script appeared on the screen as a transcript that had to be read by the audience. By doing this, Abu Hamdan played with silence, effectively making the piece voiceless, the only sound that of the targets moving back and forth. In his own words:

> "The video tribunal does not preside over the voices of the victims but rather seeks to amplify their silence, fundamentally questioning the ways in which rights are being heard today."[68]

Connected to Lawrence Abu Hamdan, both across cultural origins and institutional formation, is independent curator, visual artist, and performer Izdihar Ayouni. In the following section, I will focus on Ayouni's work and its relevance in relation to the anticipated overarching themes of situated knowledges, public truth, and the multiperspectival approach across disciplines.

Izdihar Afyouni

> *I interviewed Izdihar Afyouni for an article I wrote a few months ago. I was so utterly intimidated by her. Not only she's twenty-five years old – same age as I am – but she's so direct, unapologetic, angry, and talented to the point of*

[68] Lawerence Abu Hamdan, 'Earshot', *Lawerence Abu Hamdan* (website), n.d., http://lawrenceabuhamdan.com/#/new-page-1/.

arrogance. She's also openly queer and into fetish and explores and debates that part of herself without censuring, whomever her audience. Not only I admired her but I also, to my disappointment, ended up labelling and fetishizing her and ultimately centring myself and my emotions in a white-guilt ridden head wreck that lasted weeks. I was writing a critical piece about putting people into boxes, neoliberal mechanisms of consumption of bodies, the silencing of people of colour hidden behind seemingly liberal agendas, and somehow I'd been the first to tiptoe around her race, her sexuality and her sexual preferences.
I've learnt, I hope, to always try to look at my own complicity in the system I am trying not to reproduce.
She added me on Instagram today and I felt my fingertips tingle.

Izdihar Afyouni is a Palestinian-Jordanian interdisciplinary artist and independent curator. Her work engages with concepts such as biopower and technologies of surveillance, eroticism, and processes of visibility and invisibility, often focusing on corporeality by centring the body as the site of ideological struggle. Her curatorial practice is frequently inferred by theoretical knowledges – Bataille, Ranciere, Foucault, Deleuze – that are then grounded, embodied, and embedded.

Connecting her to both Forensic Architecture and Lawrence Abu Hamdan is Goldsmith University of London, where Afyouni is a graduate from the Arts and Politics MA program. She has exhibited her work in the UK, Palestine, Jordan, and Brazil. Afyouni works both on individual pieces and collaboratively under a pseudonym with other artists and scholars.

The concepts of collectivity and collective authorship are a further commonality with Forensic Architecture and Abu Hamdan: vis a vis working with crowd-sourced materials to reconstruct an event from multiple perspectives and the collective nature of their endeavour, Forensic Architecture looks at the reestablishment of collectivity as a modus operandi whilst moving back and forth between collective authorship and individual representation or leadership - i.e. Forensic Architecture as a whole versus Lawrence Abu Hamdan's individual figure or Eyal Wizman.

Hence, in continuity with this fluctuation between singularity and collectivity, Afyouni's works can be situated in a wilful questioning and queering of the triangle of modernity of artist-audience-institution that has also characterised contemporary art in general. The figure of the artist has changed, shifted towards a plurality of sorts. Under the modernist regime, the artist was symbolically placed outside looking down at reality[69], whilst today we are faced with the definite loss of that position which, however, through its fall has

[69] Avant-garde Art for example.

allowed the emergence of a different standpoint, i.e. solidarity through the act of reaching across separate positions. Solidarity in this sense can be seen as a fragmentation that leaves space for a 'support in difference' that often comes from a shared experience of the time of crisis.

Hence the proliferation in recent years of artistic collectives and para-institutions such as *We are here academy*[70] in Amsterdam, or the *Silent academy* of Matera.[71] The disenchantment with the conditions of the world, with the idea of art as purely aesthetics or purely critical that characterises the contemporary condition, has brought together those who are in conditions of precarity and, through a shared feeling of urgency, has spurred them to create political art. As professor aesthetics and art history Boris Groys writes,

> "In its different versions, contemporary art is driven by the desire for equality and inclusiveness….The contemporary artist does not want to be extraordinary, or regarded as a genius or prophet. Rather, the contemporary artist should merely be one of the crowd, who thematises everyday life, who gets involved in the contemporary social and political practice."[72]

Afyouni has a long lasting interest in interrogating ideologies and looking towards new and radical ways of living and being in common. As an Arab female artist, vocal about her sexuality and declaredly interested in fetish, she has been subjected to countless attempts to be reduced to a label, to make her personhood and her work palatable and acceptable for whomever is consuming her. Despite this, she remains uncompromisingly driven towards her research interests and her artistic practice, not diluting her multi-layered identity.

[70] Art project started in 2012 aimed at undocumented refugees who are unable to access to education. In collaboration with BAK basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, the refugees who partake in the project drive the curriculum and, through the project, receive documentation in the form of certificates of attendance. Thus, the un-documented become documented, from invisibility to visibility by building an archive of representation. For more information: https://www.bakonline.org/

[71] Cultural and artistic project born with the intent of involving migrants in Italy and their talents and competences in a collaborative partnership with locals towards integration. For more information: https://www.matera-basilicata2019.it/it/programma/temi/riflessioni-e-connessioni/1356-the-silent-academy.html

[72] Boris Groys, 'The Contemporary Condition: Postmodernity, Post-Socialism, Postcolonialism', in *Former West* (Utrecht, Cambridge: BAK basis voor actuele kunst, The MIT Press, 2016).

Thicker Than Blood[73]

Thicker Than Blood is a "research project and series of participatory concept exhibitions that immerses the audience in an experience of the ethical and psychological implications of racial and genetic profiling policies."[74] There have been two instalments of the art night to date; both took place between March and September 2017 in London in a BDSM dungeon and LGBTQ+ friendly space that occasionally hosts art exhibitions.

Following a personal policy of transparency and accessibility, Afyouni chose to record the performances and parts of the art night to publish on her personal website. I examined video recordings of the evening and photographs alongside carrying out close readings of curatorial texts written by Afyouni herself. I also had access to audio-visual and written interviews of both Afyouni and some of the artists and performers of the event. Almost all the material is present on her website.

Participation to *Thicker Than Blood I* was encouraged mainly amongst people from the medical community and from the fetish community, as a conscious choice to avoid echo chambers and stimulate discussions about race from separate standpoints. The events were free to attend with the exception of a mandatory donation of a drop of blood, which was taken by medical personnel and then tested on site. According to the result of the testing – Afyouni later disclosed it was a white blood cells count – participants were marked with a symbol on their hands and separated into blood groups. According to their blood group, the audience's access to the exhibition would vary, granting them privileges or restricting them according to a completely arbitrary exercise of power. A consent form to be signed at the beginning of the process let the participants know that no data would be stored at the end of the event and that all blood samples would be taken to a local hospital and incinerated. Everyone was free to leave the event at any time.

Afyouni drew up three categories into which participants would be distributed: 'Kindred' who had access to the entire art night; 'People in the middle' who could access only part of the artworks and performances; 'Undesireables', who were denied access to the

[73] A similar version of this subchapter was published on April 30th as an article for online museum MOED-Museum of Equality and Difference, and it is available at https://moed.online/thicker-than-blood-participatory-art-expose-subvert-biopower/

[74] Afyouni Izdihar, 'Thicker than blood : consequence', *Izdihar Afyouni* (website), n.d., http://www.interventionistgod.com/consequence.

entire event and were singled out to be submitted to a mock interrogation structured to resemble the UK boarder agency's modus operandi.

The interrogation room was located inside the venue, adjacent to the exhibition space, separated from it only by thick curtains. Thus, oftentimes, participants who had access to the entire exhibition would find themselves in hearing distance of aggressive and intimidating exchanges that were going on in the small interrogation booth close to them.

> "By creating a temporary environment where differing levels of access where upheld by an unknown structure and determined by bio-data, the event reproduced what it might be like to not have access to privileges often taken for granted. This constructed a temporary social system and hierarchy that was upheld by the organisers as well as by participants who tacitly supported through their continued participation."[75]

The organisers – and, implicitly, those who were above the blood groups and moved freely inside the temporary social system - were queer people, non-binary individuals, and women of colour. Afyouni thus created a temporary nation state based on a complete role-reversal, a dystopic and subversive version of western society.

Subversion also took place at the level of the strictly curatorial aspect of the art night, because Afyouni decided to reflect upon the role of the audience and of the artists. "The audience is too used to being held in high esteem, as though they are needed for the art to exist. I have deliberately chosen to destroy this expectation."[76] *Thicker Than Blood* questions people's access to art, ideas of consumption of an art piece by the public, and does not offer any form of reconciliation, explanation or catharsis.

Fundamental to understanding her work in *Thicker Than Blood* is the concept of institutionalised violence, deconstructed through an eroticised aesthetics.[77] The blood functions as a red thread linking the meta level and the concrete embodied reality of genetics, torture and fetish practices such as bloodletting, all grouped together to create an immersive theatrical performance that foregoes categories, forums, and boundaries.

[75] Izdihar Afyouni and Jessica Worden, Cruelty, Consent and Consequence, Cuntemporary Magazine, 17 November 2018, https://cuntemporary.org/cruelty-consent-consequence/?fbclid=IwAR2ho4N-kk1N0mu5uBmRloI8D9ZpHy9gek5Zf0_L0qatYkm0dlM4XHi-gN8.
[76] Izdihar, 'Thicker Than Blood : Consequence'.
[77] Izdihar.

This boundary crossing in search of dialogue and debate, a confrontation without borders, is a search for "public truth"[78] that, once again, brings the work of Forensic Architecture close to Izdihar Afyouni's. In her own words,

> "You have this electricity in the room between people who are having…different experiences of the evening and they are aware that not everyone is having the same, and they can kind of see it and they can kind of hear it but they are stuck in their experience for the entire night. And in a way that is…similar to the experiences that we have with being people of colour, being white or being queer. You walk through the world in one way and you are aware of these different perspectives and ways of being…but it's never your experience."[79]

Afyouni pushes for an engagement in critical dialogue across perspectives in order to stop thinking in terms of systems. The much sought after 'truth' does not consist of different perspectives pieced together to create a harmonious whole. The 'truth' is contradictory, not neat; it is a process, not a finished product. The truth lies in the situatedness of knowledge and it should be conceptualised differently, *Thicker Than Blood* argues. It has ceased to be the noun 'veritas' and moved toward the verb 'verification', a process rather than a stasis[80].

However, let us assume that truth is indeed always contradictory, not neat, a process and so forth. How does this claim play out in the context of a court of justice? Is the concept of justice not itself either in progress – and thus contradictory, not neat, a process – or finished, made? Can such a multiperspectival, fluctuating approach to the idea of truth, so deeply connected to justice, undermine the very concept and practice of western justice? The non-hegemonic, political practice of public truth and situated knowledge answers these interrogatives by making the process of verification transparent and public and more significant than a static truth.

As I have shown in this chapter, the creative methodology of fragmentation paradoxically unites the work of Forensic Architecture and Izdihar Afyouni in a continuous investigation of truth. Their core aim is the will to create a common engagement with an issue, stimulating transparent solidarity in processes of justice making. Conceptualising truth in a fluctuating way as mentioned above does not, in any way, diminish the pursuit of justice if the idea of justice is also intended as multifaceted and capable of evolving, shapeshifting,

[78] Eyal Weizman, *Propositions #7/1: Counter Forensics*.
[79] Nada Akl, *Of Blood and Bureaucracy: Consequences of the Arbitrary*, Annotated video, 2018, https://vimeo.com/290222183.
[80] Eyal Weizman, *Propositions #7/1: Counter Forensics*.

and adapting, a conceptualisation that does not undermine its importance but actually problematizes the workings of power within it.

In the following chapter I will look at the practices mobilised by both Forensic Architecture and Izdihar Afyouni to ‘give flesh’ to statistical violence and to unveil and thus contrast normative power, while concurrently investigating the reasons why critical and multiperspectival dialogue find hospitable grounds on which to grow in the arts.

Chapter three: Giving flesh to biopower

> *This weekend the European elections took place and in Italy fear, racism, xenophobia and ignorance won. Salvini, leader of Lega Nord (far right, populist movement), triumphed.*
> *There is no more time, not in the sense that time itself is ending, but that the possibility to make changes, to avoid going backwards instead of forward will. It's "the end of liveable time" of Marina Garcès.* [81] *Eleven years to take action against the climate emergency; the migration crisis; widespread hegemony of populist movements bringing fascism back to life…there is no more time. And it feels irrelevant to sit here, on my couch, every day, and write about things instead of doing things. A statement from Jeremy Deller, English conceptual artist, is stuck in my mind: "I went from being an artist who makes things to an artist who makes things happen."*[82] *I think I also start to feel the undeniable urge to make things happen instead of reflecting on things. And all the while, there are few things I enjoy more than sitting on this couch drinking green tea while I write. But, at the end of liveable time, this feels misplaced, like a small vice I am entertaining longer than I should, like a cult of the self that needs to go.* I *love writing,* I *want to research this,* I *want to graduate in August. But* we *have no more time.*

As I have addressed in chapter one, biopower as an operational concept is difficult to locate for it shapeshifts into different mechanisms of control that evolve and adapt with the times. From societies of disciplines, we have moved towards societies of control[83], the microscopic gaze has offered a new, deeper command of bodies and populations, norms adjust to the changing times and maintain their largely uncontested rule as agents of biopower, and data has become an invaluable currency for power.

Norms and data farming on the one hand take place in the smallest of daily actions, and on the other foster the very formation of subjecthood and its consumption and control. The ubiquitous invisibility of both norms and data, their un-fleshed ephemerality juxtaposed to their concrete importance for biopower's working today, makes it so that both case studies analysed in the present thesis focus on these particular aspects of biopower and they do so by mobilising the theoretical tool of mimesis[84], that I will delve into further on in this chapter.

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[81] Marina Garcés, 'Conditio Posthuma', *The Great Regression* (website), 18 May 2017, http://www.thegreatregression.eu/conditio-posthuma/.
[82] Carly Berwick, 'A Different Way to Make a Difference', Art News, 1 March 2010, http://www.artnews.com/2010/03/01/a-different-way-to-make-a-difference/.
[83] See Deleuze's *Postscript on the societies of control* in chapter one.
[84] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

The shared urgency to imagine different ways of being together in a time of crisis, already delineated throughout the previous chapters, unites Forensic Architecture and *Thicker Than Blood* in their attention towards the breaking of norms through boundary crossing and the subversive re-purposing of damaging practices.

In regards of damaging practices, Rosi Braidotti warned against a form of population control that Foucaultian analyses could not account for[85]: mass-scale data farming. Data farming, understood here as the process by which data is accumulated and processed using statistical analysis techniques to gain insight of and control over systems, populations and individuals, is a silent and often uncontested method of control and statistical violence.

Data farming fosters patriarchal, white supremacists capitalism as it has provided new means to act on consumers in order to fuel its principal aim of constant profit making. It accompanies a new stage of capitalism characterised by the disappearance of borders between economics and politics. In fact, data farming has also accelerated and incentivised the classification of populations and groups of individuals on the basis of genetic tendencies – genetic profiling – and "vital capacities for self-organization"[86]. This vital information becomes a currency that is sold to the highest bidder, politicised and used to either foster life or disallow it to the point of death.

Both the works of Izdihar Afyouni and Forensic Architecture embed this violence and flesh it out, making its ubiquitous transparency touchable. The reactions of participants of *Thicker Than Blood* to being arbitrarily excluded from something they assumed, due to their privilege, they would have unconditional access to, range from anger to sadness to resentment. "What is wrong with my blood?"[87] asks a young white woman in one of the recordings available on Afyouni's official website. For some, the whole procedure may have been deeply unsettling, without however shifting from a reflection on the inequality within the microcosm of the evening to a reflection on systemic inequality that the art night ultimately wanted to stimulate; for others, shock might have arisen from the realisation of how much blindness privilege calls for.

The act of taking blood as 'payment' – the only condition to take part in the event – begs the questioning of the actual intangibility of statistical, regulatory control, and violence.

[85] Braidotti, 'The Inhuman: Life beyond Death'.
[86] Braidotti.
[87] Izdihar, 'Thicker Than Blood : Consequence'.

Blood evokes complex feelings deeply woven into various aspects of physicality and individuality, but it also encloses a plethora of abstract information, of data, of significant details about somebody's past, present and, with the aid of genomic mapping technologies, future.

Vis a vis *Thicker Than Blood*'s intervention to unveil statistical violence and institutional racism – quite literally, by piercing the body and thus showing their fleshy, corporeal consequences and workings – Lawrence Abu Hamdan's *Earshot* is driven by the similar aim of queering, unveiling, and grounding those aspects of justice work which remain unquestioned or un-explored, such as the political use of sound.

Interestingly, sound could appear as a contradicting approach in the appeal for a grounding of knowledge production as, instinctively, sound seems to have an ephemeral quality, to be dis-embodied, rather than embodied, 'un-fleshed'. However, not only the curatorial process involved in the presentation of Forensic Architecture's findings is already a process centred on 'giving flesh' to the outcomes of the investigation, but also sound itself is often visualised by Abu Hamdan. In *Earshot*, red, orange and blue spectrograms visually help distinguish the sounds of shots; or, in *Disputed Utterances*, - a different exhibition - a series of drawings represent the parts of the mouth that are used to produce sounds[88].

These graphic representations of sound help to situate it and ground it, fleshing it out. Nonetheless, the intention is not to elevate visuality over acoustics; they are complementary and in continuous dialogue with each other, as Abu Hamdan shows. The result of this interaction is an audio-visuality of sorts that, recalling the red thread running in the previous chapters, is deeply influenced by a move towards interdisciplinarity or supra-disciplinarity.

Thus, what is the importance of 'fleshing' the invisible workings of biopower? Both Afyouni and Forensic Architecture, through Abu Hamdan, allow for the realisation of individual responsibility and implication in biopower's mechanisms, as well as the suggestion

[88] "'Disputed Utterances' (2018) is a series of charcoal drawings and photographs that mimic the linguistic process of palatography, a specific method to identify which parts of the mouth are used when making different sounds. It involves painting a mixture of charcoal and olive oil on the tongue or the roof of the mouth and having that person pronounce a specific sound. The trace of the phoneme is then printed on the speaker's palate in charcoal. Abu Hamdan uses these images in order to tell different narratives of what in legal cases is referred to as a 'disputed utterance', a trial where someone's culpability or innocence is hinged upon conflicted claims over a recorded word or phrase. By using actual disputed utterances from real legal cases, Abu Hamdan produces a narrative that calls our attention to the ways in which our voices can become crime scenes."
Lawerence Abu Hamdan, 'Disputed Utterances', Lawrence Abu Hamdan, 2018, http://lawrenceabuhamdan.com/#/utterances/.

of collective modes of resistance. If biopower works through micro-regulations, alternating between the exercise of control over the individual and over populations, then resistance to it can take place at a micro-level, alternating between individuality and collectivity in the creation of new ways of co-operation and being in common. Since normative power, "is simultaneously totalising and individualising in its operation"[89] as Mills reminds her readers, the continuous shift between verticality and horizontality, singularity and multiperspectival approaches is essential.

One of the fundamental strategies Afyouni and Forensic Architecture propose to enact such resistance is the particular methodology, literary trope, and political tactic of mimesis. Mimesis, originally theorised by Luce Irigaray[90], is the wilful occupation of a harmful image[91], fostering closeness to a damaging stereotype or a normalising practice and, in that closeness, showing it to be fake and oppressive.

Mimesis is a powerful and problematic tool: the danger in mimetic practices lies in mastering the closeness without being assimilated by the harmful practice or image - Irigaray has been traditionally accused of being a biological essentialist especially in relation to her deployment of 'écriture feminine'. However, a subtle but fundamentally important component of mimesis that Irigaray – and Afyouni, as I will soon discuss – often resorts to, is irony. It is not by chance that she defines mimesis as "playful repetition"[92]. In her own words,

> "To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself-inasmuch as she is on the side of 'perceptible,' of 'matter'-to 'ideas,' in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means 'to unveil' the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function."[93]

As can be gathered from the quote, unveiling the invisible is the key to mimetic practices. The act of rendering that which was supposed to remain invisible, visible is a powerful resistance method that *Thicker Than Blood* and *Earshot* – considered as synecdoche for Forensic Architecture's work – embrace.

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[89] Mills, 'What Is Normalization?'
[90] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*.
[91] Milica Trakilović, 'Feminist Aesthetics and/in Art: Deconstruction through Art and Visuality' (3 October 2018).
[92] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*.
[93] Irigaray.

Afyouni's decision to re-create a temporary nation state where individuals are arbitrarily assigned to blood categories associated with privilege or a lack thereof seems to be a fitting example of mimesis. By re-producing the harmful practice of genetic and racial profiling in the context of an immersive theatrical performance, Afyouni not only unveils that violence but by inhabiting it, shows its complete arbitrary and constructed nature.

As Donna Haraway wrote, "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties".[94] Thus, the intention and the way in which Afyouni chose to reproduce these harmful categories, matters. There is a strong awareness of the "playful repetition" in the choice to categorise individuals according to their white blood cells count – an ironic nod towards white supremacy – but, parallel to this, there is also a conscious decision to invert social conventions and create a temporary state where positions of power are occupied by conventionally marginalised individuals – queer and trans people, and womxn of colour run the evening. As Irigaraian scholar Ping Xu writes,

> "Few would fail to notice that there is an ironic tone hovering in virtually all of Irigaray's writings. However, there are indeed few who have tried to link it with Irigaray's strategy. As I see it, the ironic tone is not a mere by-product of Irigaray's mimicry, but the very mode of her executing both 'aggressive mimicry' and 'defensive mimicry.' It is here that the meaning of her 'playful repetition' lies, and it is here that we find the reason why Irigaray often speaks of laughter."[95]

In line with *Thicker Than Blood*, Abu Hamdan's exhibition walks the narrow path between harmful reproduction of traumatic events and unveiling of truth and corrupt powers. By 'putting up for show' the ways in which sound is politicised through the reconstructions of human rights violation cases he has been called to consult upon, Abu Hamdan's *Earshot* is a further instance of mimesis. Israeli officials' statements, ballistic analyses, and court cases regarding the Nakba Day killings were figurations of a hegemonic truth to which Abu Hamdan juxtaposed the use of same spatial and media figurations – i.e. the use of a shooting range, of documents, interviews, reconstructing a fake trial – that showed the malleability of information while proposing a different account of the facts.

[94] Donna J. Haraway, 'SF: Science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, so far', *Ada - A Journal Od Gender New Media & Technology*, no. 3 (November 2013).
[95] Ping Xu, 'Irigaray's Mimicry and the Problem of Essentialism', *Hypatia* 10, no. 4 (1995): 76–89, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810206.

Trapped in a loop, the images displaying the firing soldiers who killed Nadeem Nawara and Mohammed Abu Daher captured by the news cameras play repeatedly for the audience of the art exhibition and for whomever decides to visit the official website of Forensic Architecture. Is that not the definition of trauma? Is that not a damaging reproduction of violence? Opinions might differ but as I see it, that is also the display of a veiled truth; the unveiling of trauma allows it to heal and Forensic Architecture together with Lawrence Abu Hamdan chose to inhabit that violence and offer its naked truth to the audience to witness and, in doing so, subvert and resist.

Thus, broadening the scope of the analysis, from *Earshot* to Forensic Architecture, the agency often makes use of the multiplicity of data available online, but mobilises it to carry out the process of verification. It musters the same techniques of white supremacist, patriarchal capitalism that play out through the workings of nation states and various smaller organizations: mass-scale data farming, discussed above, is the very instrument that allows Forensic Architecture's investigations to take place. From data farming to data mining, technologies of biopower become technologies of public truth.

In regards to Irigaray's "playful repetition" mentioned above, the link to irony is less apparent if not completely absent in the works of Forensic Architecture and Abu Hamdan. It is substituted by a reinforced connection to artistic production and aesthetics. Traditionally related to artificiality, illusion, subjectivity, and affective reactions, the concept of 'aesthetics' seems to be adverse to the idea of justice. Aesthetic contemplations, however, according to Forensic Architecture, are intrinsically tied to all dimensions of forensics. As Weizman writes, "Forensics is an 'aesthetic' practice because it involves the modes and the means by which incidents are sensed and evidence is presented."[96] Not only it is an aesthetic practice, it is also an affective one. The sensory world of evidence, the affective and emotive reactions of the actors involved are as important as the result of a case. In fact, they are essential elements to reach that result. As I see it, no surprise should come at the fact that Forensic Architecture weaves into its work a variety of artistic practices to strengthen it since the divide of art and science, of cold intellect and emotion is a fictitious one.

Aesthetics, affect, imitation, and irony find their common ground in performance practices. The very word 'mimesis' derives from the Greek verb 'mimeisthai', which means 'to imitate' and is deeply connected to the aesthetic, artistic realm. This calls to mind

[96] Eyal Weizman, 'Forensic Aesthetics with Eyal Weizman', Forensic Architecture, 7 June 2018, https://forensic-architecture.org/programme/events/forensic-aesthetics-with-eyal-weizman.

Foucault's observation on different configurations of power and their different expressions in relation to mimesis and its performative, artistic potential. In his own words,

> "A power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death…a power whose task is to take charge of life need[ing] continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms….Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendour"[97].

The stasis and distant positioning associated with sovereign power – compared to the pervasiveness of biopower – made its excessive displays necessary to continuously affirm its presence. The absolute power of the sovereign is substituted by a logic of measuring, calculating and normalising: whereas in invisibility lies biopower's strength and far reaching grasp, sovereign power is connected to the shock factor, to a showmanship of death.

The examples of Forensic Architecture and Afyouni suggest that performance, spectacle, and the aesthetic presentation of findings as the "display [of] murderous splendour" are instrumental in the resistance to biopower. By toppling over the dynamic suggested by Foucault, they mobilise spectacle to make visible the invisible violence of statistical analyses, of norms, of biopower.

However, does performative repetition still have a place in the subversion of mechanisms of biopolitical administration? My hesitancy comes from the fact that, despite the shared – Irigaray, Butler[98] et al. – importance of mimesis for uncovering the hegemonic practices and their constructed fictitiousness, there is a limit to its workings: propositional absence. "Playful repetition"[99] is still working within the ruse of biopower and, while raising questions, does not actively propose alternatives, anticipating what could be. Braidotti wrote on affirmation as a fundamental practice to avoid stopping at critique of the present conditions and moving over towards a creative and interconnected imagining and proposing of alternatives. In her own words,

> "It comes down to a question of creativity: affirmative ethical relations create possible forms of transformation of the negative by mobilizing resources that have been left untapped, including our desires and imagination. The affective forces are the driving energy that concretises in actual, material relations. These relations constitute a network, web or rhizome of interconnection with others. What this means practically is that the conditions for politics and ethical agency

[97] Foucault, 'Right of Death and Power over Life'.
[98] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990).
[99] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

are not dependent on the current state of the terrain, but are actively engaged in the creation of alternative social relations and other possible worlds."[100]

Here lies the main divide between Afyouni's work and Forensic Architecture's. I believe that, whereas *Thicker Than Blood* truly embodies the concept of mimesis as a basic structure for the event, indeed expanding it through the stimulation of dialogue and critical engagement across disciplines and people, it does not reach beyond the realm of representation to the realm of affirmative proposition. Whereas Afyouni's art night does not offer reconciliation but is symbolically the shock of a bleeding wound, Forensic Architecture actively suggests new ways of creating human, non-human, knowledge, and institutional connections. *Earshot* is not only a critique of the inner, invisible, and corrupt workings of justice, but is also a proposition of a new and different approach.

Does it follow that mimetic practices without a propositional aspect are needless? To take on even mimically a harmful practice is, in itself, a counterbalance to the practice itself and thus, an essential part of resistance. Furthermore, the two are not mutually exclusive: the queering enacted by practices such as *Thicker Than Blood* is significant not only for its grounding work but also for the work of raising awareness. It is as significant as the active imagining and creating of alternatives carried out by Forensic Architecture's team.

To fully be conscious and subvert of biopower mechanisms, however, there is the need to be critical of one's own participation in said mechanisms. As I see it, a further point of convergence between the work of Forensic Architecture and Izdihar Afyouni is the lack of self-reflection from a purely material stand point: going back to chapter one and the reflections upon the writings of Hito Steyerl, contemporary art is deeply embedded in the neoliberal system, thriving on exploitation[101].

I would be interested in taking the concept of transparency and accessibility – public truth – dear to Izdihar and Forensic Architecture, one step further and not only have access to revenue statements, expenses for exhibitions, information on where the materials come from, how they were transported on sites, how much the interns are paid – if they are paid at all – but also witness an active reflection upon these issues. Following the money trail, questioning and explaining it seems to be taboo even for these innovative two projects.

[100] Rosi Braidotti, 'Affirmation, Pain and Empowerment', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 14, no. 3 (2008): 7–36.
[101] Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy'.

In conclusion and on a more affirmative note, the exciting and, as I see it, innovative push done by projects such as Forensic Architecture and *Thicker Than Blood* has at its core the attempt to give flesh to invisible, pervasive, and dis-embodied mechanisms of control and administration of populations and bodies. To ask for justice – and change – and suggest ways of achieving them they first mimetically give body to injustice and violence, asking us to see and touch it and not offering finite answers and reconciliation but pushing for engagement across divisions.

> *Re-reading Stuart Hall's* Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies *I stumbled upon a paragraph in which he reflects on something I think is the perfect formulation of the confused feelings I tried to grapple with until now, both in my mind and on the pages of this thesis. "Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies?"*[102] *he asks. He's referring to the AIDS crisis, but how can we not relate that feeling to the wave of populist and neo-fascist movements washing over the global north? In the face of tragedy, of injustice and violence made into political campaigns, of stripped rights and steps back, I feel the ephemerality and inconsequentiality of a dissertation. The choice of Afyouni's and Abu Hamdan's works seem clear to me now. The fascination I have with them is a direct consequence not only of their deep engagement with politics but also of their ability to weave together theoretical work with activist practice, with accessible, tangible change. They manage to answer the urgency in a way that feels grounded. Their practices are fleshed and drenched with the blood of the people who ask those urgent questions and who urgently need answers. Afyouni and Abu Hamdan not only share geographical and cultural origins but also, in a way that I did not foresee, academic formation. From the Arab context to Goldsmith University in London, they embody two themes I hold dear: institutional critique from within an institution – Ahmed's working* on *University instead of* in *it – and boundary crossing. Fragmentation and the creation of alliances across multiple identities and perspectives is what they inspire in me and where I put my hopes for the future.*

[102] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacie', in *Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), 277–86.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have tried to map similarities and points of convergence between two instances of contemporary art dealing with the intricacies of biopower today. I raised questions about the potential of contemporary artistic practices as unique sites of resistance to bio-regulatory mechanisms.

Contemporary art, as I have shown, is a locus where conversations about precarity and the search for political, social, and cultural alternatives have taken place more often than in other contexts. I believe that is because, as Maria Hlavajova, researcher and founder of BAK basis voor actuele kunst in Utrecht, writes, "there are some specific instances that fall through the net of academic thinking, of disciplinary thinking, of established departmental thinking, which can be picked up by art practitioners."[103]

Contemporary art, due to its "ultraformalism"[104] discussed in chapter one, does not shy away from indeterminacy, lack of clarity or answers, rejecting arrogant knowledge production that refuses to be situated and rendered accountable. However, contemporary art is also undeniably implicated in the neoliberal capitalist market, thriving on and reproducing the same damaging practices that it aims at critiquing and exposing.

This inevitable implication in the system I am trying to critique holds significant potential for self-awareness and accountability and for realistic, grounded interventions. Biopower's mechanisms such as the ones presented in this dissertation – statistical violence, mass-scale data farming, and normalisation – function according to the opposite: silent, dis-embodied, ubiquitous, un-accountable power dynamics. It is in asking the questions that are silenced, visualising that which is kept hidden, and thinking and working through new connections and new alliances that contemporary artistic practices offer powerful avenues for resistance to hegemonic power. As Maria Hlavajova reminds us once again in her discussions with art practitioners and theorists,

> "In asking what systems of knowledge do not ask, one is opening space for new knowledge and in the production of that new knowledge, there you see the role of the artist-researcher."[105]

[103] Maria Hlavajova, Jill Winder, and Binna Choi, 'Introduction', in *On Knowledge Production: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, Critical Reader Series (BAK basis voor actuele kunst, Revolver, 2008).
[104] Malik, 'When Is Contemporary Art?'
[105] Maria Hlavajova, Jill Winder, and Binna Choi, 'Introduction'.

A somewhat silently pervasive part of this thesis has been the notion of fragmentation. *Is this an ironic nod towards the silent pervasiveness of biopower? Oh my. Ok that is terrible. Should I change it?* As I discuss the unique positioning of contemporary art to expose and subvert biopower, fragments of its characteristics, showing proximity to and hybridity with biopower, emerge: disciplinary boundary dissolution, entanglement with the neoliberal market economy, lack of definite temporality and so on. Fragmentation as a way of experiencing the world and learning how to thrive in the possibilities that arise from the space created by the different fragment and the light that they diffract is also what Forensic Architecture and Afyouni offer. Fragments are not puzzle pieces: in trying to put them back together aiming to return to a false idea of original union, their margins will never realign; perfect unity cannot be achieved and what is unity if not a patriarchal, fictitiously constructed concept[106]? What is unity if not a "god's trick"[107]? Resistance is as fragmented as memory; it is a gloriously unapologetic scattering action.

Fragments of myself interrupt these pages in a (in)coherent array of thoughts on my role as a feminist writer and researcher, on the condition of the world and my place in it, on the institutional demands of university today, on art and our collective fascination with it, and on my personal life and its inevitable inference on everything I write.

> *But maybe hope is not enough, as the incredibly gifted thinker Roxane Gay wrote for the New York Times just a few days ago. To the chorus of 'now what?' of gender studies graduates that I will soon join, Roxane Gay answers that the world is on fire and we are going to have to grapple with it. I've felt this viscerally all through the writing of this dissertation. So maybe she's right and hope is not enough to deal with the disastrous realities of a failing democracy and a dying planet. We need to think about responsibility and possibility, she writes. Our responsibility in what has happened and in imagining and pursuing possibilities for what will happen in the future. I think then that the bravery and uniqueness of gender studies' graduates reside in their ability to reflect upon and speak out on the scary realities and to pursue the 'otherwise' in spite of their terrified chorus of 'now what?'*

[106] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*.
[107] Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'.

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