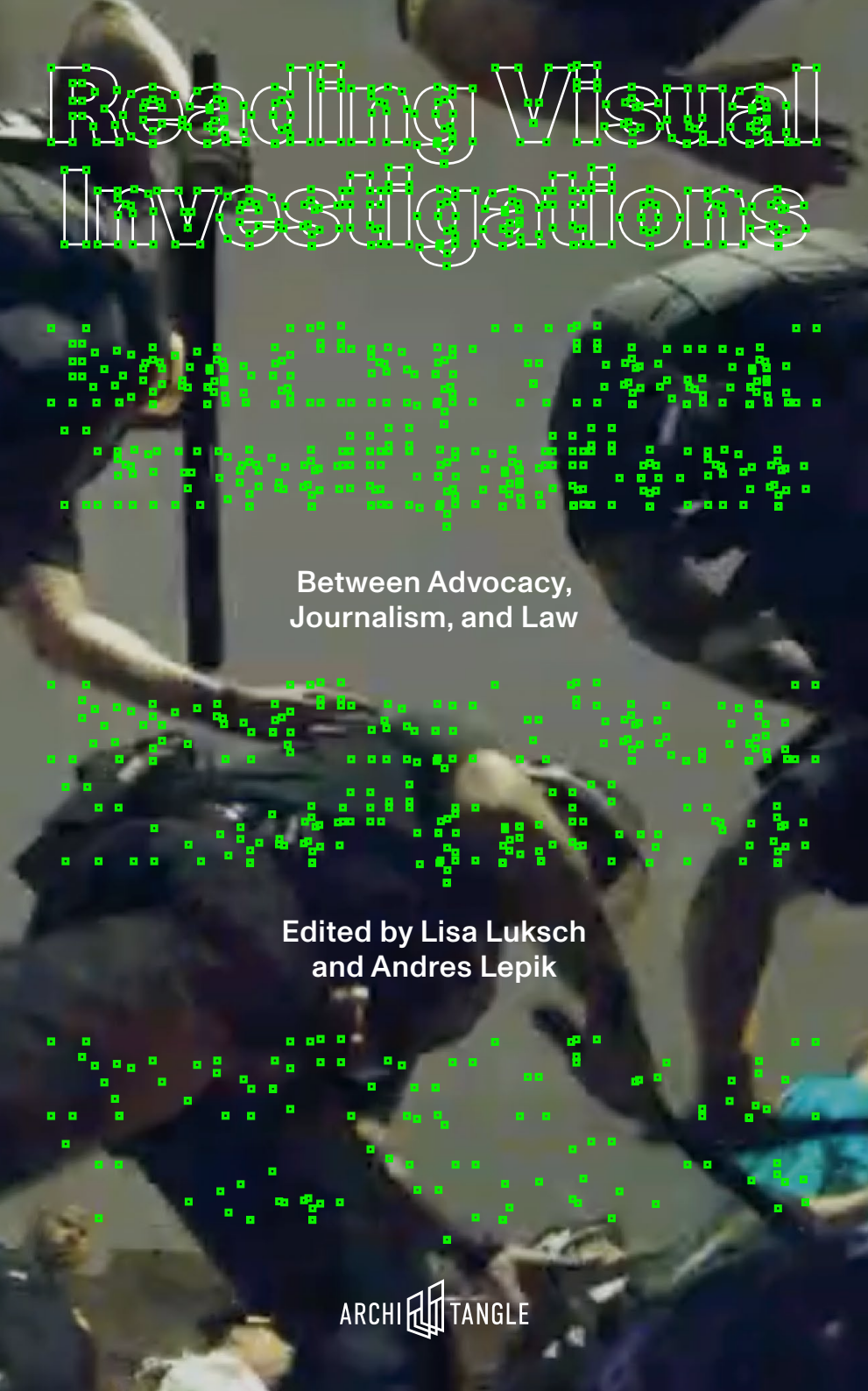
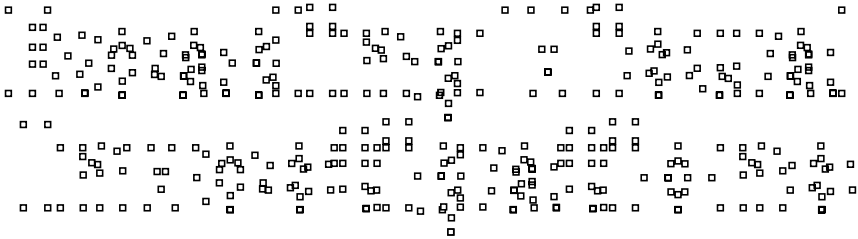
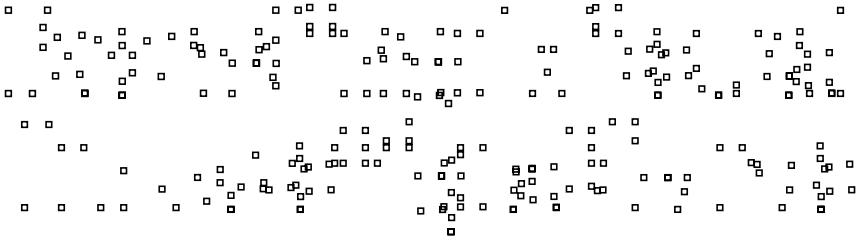
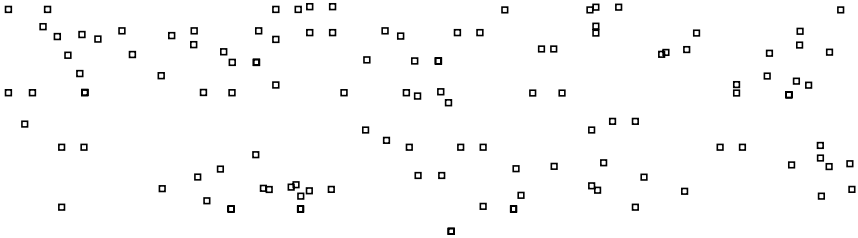

Reading Visual Investigations
Between Advocacy, Journalism, and Law
Edited by Lisa Luksch and Andres Lepik
ARCHITANGLE

Reading Visual Investigations







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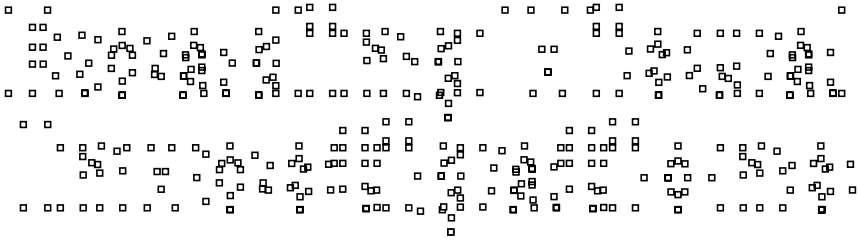

Between Advocacy, Journalism, and Law

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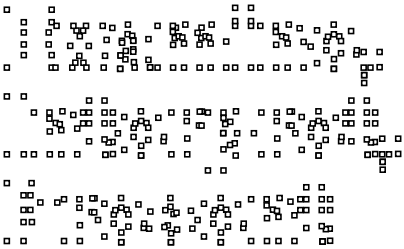
Examining Interplay Present



Lisa Luksch and Andres Lepik

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, was a significant step toward establishing an ethical compass for globalization. Since then, violations of these rights are no longer purely national matters, but affect us all and can be prosecuted in international courts. But how do we ensure that these rights are actually protected and enforced in an increasingly interconnected and complex world? This is precisely where the field of visual investigations comes in—a field that is dedicated to the image-based investigation of human rights violations and is thus breaking new ground in promoting justice and accountability. *Visual Investigations: Between Advocacy, Journalism, and Law* arose from our belief that architecture plays a central role in this endeavor. Architecture can not only shape, but also help strengthen the mechanisms of advocacy and accountability. With this reader, we would like to make the current discourse on visual investigations accessible and show how architectural expertise actively contributes to uncovering human rights violations and making them visible.

Wherever there are humans, says Sam Dubberley in an interview, there is always architecture. And therefore, wherever human rights violations take place, the reconstruction of space and environment is helpful in clarifying them. Dubberley, the head of digital investigations at Human Rights Watch, explains why for around fifteen years now more and more architects have been involved in uncovering human rights violations around the world. Such violations are more present than ever before, not least of all due to the ubiquitous availability of image sources in public discourse: smartphones, satellites, and surveillance and police cameras document injustice and violence all over the world, even in places where we are denied physical access and personal reporting. The linking of this video and image content with people, places, and events has thus been established for some time now as a new field for architecture in close cooperation with other disciplines and has led to momentous findings and even court rulings at an international level.

The exhibition *Visual Investigations: Between Advocacy, Journalism, and Law* and the accompanying reader are the result of

an interdisciplinary exchange between the Architecture Museum of the Technical University of Munich (TUM), four internationally active research teams and their respective cooperation partners, and a number of experts from academic and professional contexts. Our use of the term "visual investigations" is based on the name of the corresponding investigative department of *The New York Times,* which was founded in 2017. Driven by the question of the role of the architectural profession and of architects themselves in uncovering and visualizing human rights violations, we initiated a number of conversations in the summer of 2023. We contacted the architect Alison Killing, whose installation on the network of detention camps in Xinjiang at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2023 was profoundly disturbing. Through Killing (who has since become a senior reporter for the visual investigations team of the *Financial Times*) and her network, we came into contact with Bellingcat, an international research collective based in Amsterdam that became especially well known for their investigation of the crash of the MH17 flight over eastern Ukraine. At the same time, we spoke to Brad Samuels, co-founder of SITU Research in New York City, one of the leading organizations in the field, whose educational work focuses on injustices in the context of human rights, the environment, and police work.

Through collaboration with the Center for Spatial Technologies (CST), a research network operating from Kyiv and Berlin at the interface of architecture, social sciences, and art, the exhibition also features an investigation carried out jointly with Forensic Architecture (FA), a research agency founded in 2010 by Eyal Weizman at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London. Forensic Architecture has long shaped the field of the same name; it has already been shown in numerous exhibitions, particularly in Germany, and has become well known there, not least of all for its research into the NSU complex. However, Eyal Weizman has cancelled Forensic Architecture's participation in our group exhibition.

Our aim with *Visual Investigations* is to present a comprehensive exhibition that offers different perspectives, methods, and

approaches and makes visible various collaborations and protagonists from the linked areas of advocacy, journalism, and law. The exhibition reader presents seven case studies on five continents in texts that examine the backgrounds, methods, content, and consequences of the research. Each of the projects in the exhibition is accompanied by visual material, including archive footage, satellite images, 3D models, and video stills. Readers of the book also have opportunity to access selected visual material by scanning QR codes in order to see exhibition views, updates on ongoing investigations, and even entire film clips. The content behind these QR codes is stored not on web servers or in the cloud, but rather on a blockchain basis in order to forestall attacks on or manipulation of the data and guarantee security of access. These measures prevent the results of investigations—which are often deemed undesirable by those responsible for the human rights violations—from being distorted or the content being taken down by third parties. The contributions include research into land dispossession in occupied territories and the consequences of the climate crisis for residents of Pacific Island states, where violence is only implicitly recognizable. But in other cases, viewers also encounter explicit descriptions and visualizations of violence, to which we would like to alert our readers in advance.

In addition to the content of the exhibition, this book presents eight texts that underline the interdisciplinarity of the field. The authors and topics range from Laura Kurgan, who can be considered one of the founders of the discipline with her Spatial Information Design Lab established in 2004 and who tells us about critical data visualization at Columbia University, to Ralf Breker's work on 3D crime scenes at the Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigation, to the founding of a network for counter-evidence by Patrick Brian Smith, which a large number of visual investigators around the world have already joined. Two journalistic contributions show how differently the German and US media view the current status of visual investigations: Lea Weinmann writes about the possibilities of open source intelligence (OSINT), which the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* has been using since Russian soldiers invaded Ukraine in 2022, while

Bora Erden, a member of the visual investigations team of *The New York Times,* points out the limitations of the new practice.

In a world in which political and military conflicts as well as the consequences of climate change are forcing more and more people to flee and protest, it seems logical that architecture is also increasingly taking on the task of exposing violence and injustice. In close cooperation with other disciplines, architecture can use its complex tools to stand up for humanity and ethical values, from spatial analysis and 3D modeling to artificial intelligence and machine learning. The aim should always be to show and present facts and connections in a manner that is as factual, transparent, objective, and independent as possible. Against the current backdrop of global competition for the right to interpret politically controversial events and the acute threat to finding truth and enlightenment through targeted misinformation, visual investigations is developing rapidly as a discipline and can actively contribute to highlighting and prosecuting the violations of human rights condemned by the global community.



Scan the QR code to see exhibition views and documentation of the public program.



NYPD's body-worn camera captures police violence during a Black Lives Matter demonstration in the Bronx neighborhood of Mott Haven.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The Impact of Visual Data on Human Rights Advocacy



Sam Dubberley [SD] in Conversation with Andres Lepik [AL]

SAM DUBBERLEY

Sam Dubberley is the director of the Technology, Rights & Investigations division at Human Rights Watch (HRW), leading the organization's work on the use of technology to investigate human rights violations and the risks technology poses to our human rights. He is also a fellow of the Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex and coeditor of the book *Digital Witness: Using Open Source Information for Human Rights Investigation, Documentation, and Accountability,* published by Oxford University Press. He has published widely on the impact of viewing harmful content during open source investigation and the risk of vicarious trauma.

ANDRES LEPIK

Andres Lepik is the director of the Architecture Museum at the Technical University of Munich and a professor of architectural history and curatorial practice there. After studying art history and completing his dissertation on Renaissance architectural models, he worked as a curator at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin and in the Architecture and Design Department of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

ANDRES LEPIK Sam, you work at the interface between technology and human rights. How did this come about and what characterizes your day-to-day work today?

SAM DUBBERLEY *(laughs)* Sadly, as a director, my day-to-day work is mostly about budgets and human resource issues. But for the sake of this interview, let's pretend I'm still something of a researcher. I've been working at this interface between technology and human rights since the Arab Spring. I think it was an interesting time that allowed us to see the power of mobile phones and remote sensing, of satellite imagery and the possibilities for researching human rights violations, especially in the context of war. In 2010, 2011, before the Arab Spring, we were often reliant on state television—Syrian, Egyptian state television—to receive visual information. And I think the developments in technology—like phone cameras and social media, for example—changed all that. They allow for people to tell their own stories and share experiences of what they have witnessed. And for us as human rights organizations, these shared experiences provide the opportunity to get a better idea of what is going on all over the world, especially in places we cannot access.

In the Digital Investigations Lab at Human Rights Watch, our day-to-day work is really about working on conflicts. Sadly, there are too many conflicts in our world today, and we work on all of them, be it the conflict in Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar, or Ethiopia. We keep looking at all of those places. And we use satellite imagery, videos and photographs, flight tracking data, and more to then compare the findings with the interviews we do. It is still crucial for us to speak to people, victims of violations, and to understand what they have experienced. But we do now use technology to back it up. A lot of the work we do is about finding information and then verifying it. In a world where facts are so contested, it is important that Human Rights Watch is perceived as an objective voice that can help establish facts.