

This article has first been published in 2020 as an introduction to *House of Common Affairs*, Journal #2 Cloisterf*ck

For reference, please use: Postema, S. (2020). Aesthetic Truth Work: Mixing Architecture with Journalism. In P. Minelgate (Ed.), *House of Common Affairs: Cloisterf*ck* (Vol. 2, p. 8.11). London, UK.

Aesthetic Truth Work: Mixing Architecture with Journalism

Can architecture be journalism, and vice versa? In the early days of my research into Artistic Journalism (the confluence of arts and journalism), the only thought possible was Rem Koolhaas, who worked as a reporter for the Dutch weekly *Haagse Post* before running off to become one of the world's most famous architects. At the height of his fame, Koolhaas returned to journalism as the editor-in-chief of the magazine *Content*, published by Taschen in 2004. In the introduction, he wrote that architecture "can become a way of thinking about anything – a discipline that represents relationships, proportions, connections, effect, the diagram of everything." This may sound megalomaniac, but makes sense when architecture is understood as a continuous response to events happening in the real world. Climate change, terrorist threat, economic fluctuation, mass refugee migrations and pandemics all affect how, or what, architects design. Therefore, architecture can indeed be read as a form of slow journalism – an unrushed reporting on the maelstrom of changes affecting us.

However, there is more that connects the two. For this, I want to take you back to the woods near Camp Amersfoort in the early 1940s, during World War II. Here a ten-year-old Armando climbed trees, played hide-and-seek with other children, and laid belly-down, hidden between bushes, observing camp prisoners being organised by SS soldiers for transportation by train to concentration camps in Germany. He heard the shots of executions. He saw prisoners being buried in the woods. He witnessed the most gruesome violence. And while his childhood universe turned upside down, the woods around him stood silent. The tall trees were still, the leaves rustled slowly, the earth remained unshaken. Years after the war ended, the artist Armando created a series of sculptures and paintings under the title *Guilty*

Landscape – an accusation aimed at all our world’s landscapes of being present as not-so-innocent bystanders of the ghastliest crimes against human beings.

I tell this story because today, truth-workers such as journalists and artists are increasingly understanding how to interrogate these landscapes, trees, bushes, buildings, and constructions as sources for reconstructing what has happened in reality. One prominent advocate in the field of truth-finding through material evidence is the artist-researcher Susan Schuppli. In her book *Material Witness* (2020) she describes “practices and procedures that enable matter to bear witness” and help an understanding of what happened. In conflict zones, in particular, where opposing parties give contrasting accounts of events, establishing a truthful account seems impossible. What is presented as “fact” by one is dismissed as “fraudulent” – or “fake news” – by the other. However, new technologies and the omnipresence of recording devices – from phones to satellites – increasingly allow truth-workers to stitch together an account of the events that is as complete as possible. The natural and urban landscape watching over – and changed by – the events that unfold plays a crucial role in reconstructing an interactive 3D model and an accurate report, and this is what collaborating architects and journalists do today.

Schuppli, for example, is a team member of the London-based research agency Forensic Architecture. The agency investigates cases of human rights violations and provides evidence that is employed for courtroom and news media reports, or reworked into art exhibitions and as narrative videos. The work centres around the interrogation of the “guilty landscape” in which human rights violations occurred. And architectural knowledge plays a crucial role. In some cases it is quite literally related to architectural processes. An example is the *Conquer and Divide* project, an ongoing Forensic Architecture investigation into how, in Gaza and the West Bank, Israel has established zones and builds walls, settlements, and border posts segregating Palestinians. In other examples, the team has worked in close collaboration with journalists. For example, Forensic Architecture worked with Lighthouse Reports, Bellingcat and *Der Spiegel* to reconstruct the murder of the Pakistani refugee Muhammad Gulzar: on 27 February 2020 Turkey opened its borders with Greece to put pressure on the EU, threatening to let many thousands of refugees cross over. A few days later, thousands of refugees, mistakenly believing they could cross the border with Greece, and guided by Turkish forces, ended up funnelled to the border fence between the countries. The Greek police and the

military had been deployed along the border, while the Turkish police stood on their side of the border. Shots were fired, several refugees were injured and Muhammad Gulzar was killed. The Turkish government claimed that the Greeks had fired live rounds, which the Greek government denounced as “fake news”.

The team interviewed eye witnesses and investigated documents, satellite images and audio and video recordings. Based on their data they created a 3D reconstruction of the surroundings and a timeline of the events as they unfolded. Their aesthetic knowledge of the landscape: treelines, lighting, shadows, and buildings, formed the basis for this reconstruction, providing evidence to support the Turkish account that indeed live rounds had been fired, most probably by Greek soldiers.

Similarly, the architect-researcher Alison Killing, working with BuzzFeed journalist Megha Rajagopalan and data tool programmer Christo Buschek, used her spatial knowledge to locate a network of prison camps in Xinjian. Her architectural insights helped to geolocate prison camps, proving that they exist despite the Chinese government’s claims to the contrary. In reflecting on the collaboration, Killing told me that expertise that is common knowledge among architects – such as how daylight reflects on buildings – turned out to be new insights for the investigative journalists. And vice versa, she finds that journalism offers much new insights that are uncommon for the average architect, such as what a reporter looks for in the research phase. Such hands-on experience shows not only that interdisciplinary collaboration between truth-workers is fruitful, but also that much vocabulary bridge-building is yet to be done.

This second issue of the *House of Common Affairs* journal aims to explore contemporary architectural practices with a special focus on the confluence of architecture and journalism in the era of post-truth. Blending and remixing aesthetic truth practices have great potential to counter propaganda and “fake news”. These practices bring fresh hope that a new wave of fact-centred projects and publications will offer strong, evidence-based narratives that convince the public, bring forth justice, and, once again, hold those in power accountable.

Stijn Postema is a researcher and teacher at the University of Amsterdam and Ede University of Applied Sciences. His research area is Artistic Journalism.

You can find the paper Artistic Journalism for free online:

Stijn Postema & Mark Deuze (2020). Artistic Journalism: Confluence in Forms, Values and Practices, *Journalism Studies*, 21:10, 1305-1322, Doi: [10.1080/1461670X.2020.1745666](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1745666)

Other sources

Alison Killing, Megha Rajagopalan & Christo Buschek (2020). 'Blacked-out spots on China's maps helped us uncover Xinjiang's camps'. *BuzzFeed News*. Retrieved 24 September 2020, from https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alison_killing/satellite-images-investigation-xinjiang-detention-camps

Rem Koolhaas (2004). *Content*. Cologne: Taschen.

Susan Schuppli (2020). *Material witness: media, forensics, evidence*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Forensic Architecture (2020). *The Killing Of Muhammad Al-arab*. Retrieved 22 September 2020, from <https://forensic-architecture.org//investigation/the-killing-of-muhammad-al-arab>