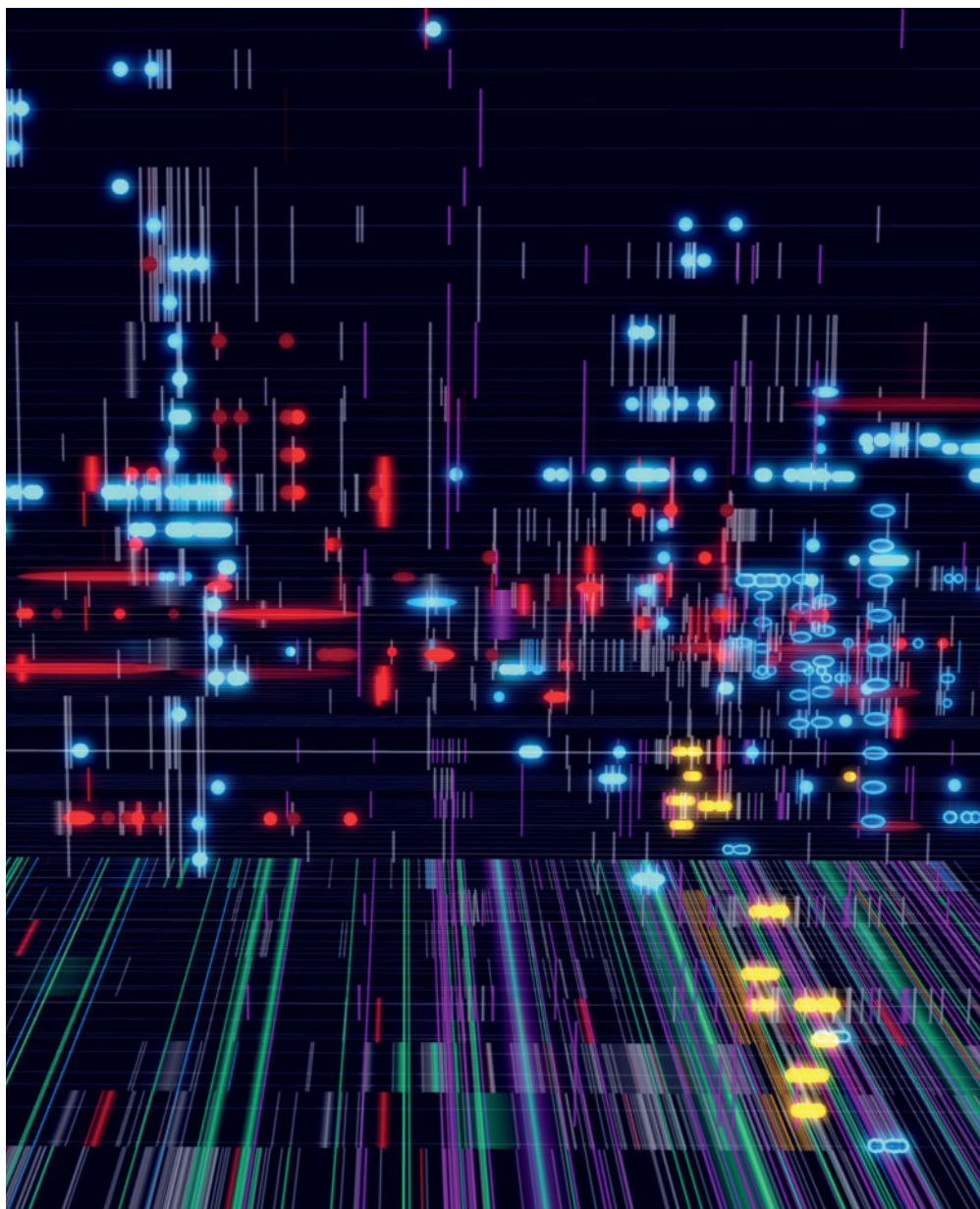


# TERROR CONTAGION

## FORENSIC ARCHITECTURE

with LAURA POITRAS

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≡ MAC

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## FORENSIC ARCHITECTURE

### with LAURA POITRAS

Forensic Architecture courageously probes violence, injustice and corruption. The research group's projects zoom both in and out from, for example, an explosion, a murder, an act of unlawful detention and torture, a chemical attack or a migrant shipwreck, focusing on the minutiae while also framing the events in a wider context. Its investigative aesthetic is akin to putting time under a magnifying glass, while space is reconstructed through multiple lenses and perspectives. An array of methods and technologies are deployed: open-source intelligence gathering, architectural software, volumetric studies, 3D renderings, recreations of crime scenes, spatial and temporal cartographies, satellite imagery, sound-mapping and machine learning data analysis, as well as witness testimonials. All these contribute to a growing catalogue of *investigations of investigations*, resulting in a form of citizens' counter forensics. In an age of surveillance and right-wing "post-truth," Forensic Architecture forges a new politics and poetics of evidence gathering and truth production, resulting in a significant contribution to legal and aesthetic discourse, while helping us to re-imagine what an engaged political art could look like.

In *Terror Contagion*, the research group has used the condition of global lockdown to turn its gaze to the digital violence of cyber-weapons. The investigation *Digital Violence: How the NSO Group Enables State Terror*, supported by Amnesty International and The Citizen Lab, examined dozens of targets of state surveillance—fellow investigators, journalists, opposition figures and activists, including close friends of the research group—to map the terrain of a new digital battlefield in which the state wages war against civil society worldwide.

Contagion is the operative metaphor for this ongoing investigation of Israeli cyber-weapons manufacturer NSO Group and the much-discussed abuses enabled by its malware Pegasus, sold to governments across the world and used to target human rights defenders, activists and journalists. As an advanced state-level cyberespionage tool, Pegasus can be covertly installed on mobile phones and other devices, enabling operators of the tool to read text messages and emails, track calls and location, collect passwords, and activate microphones and cameras. The 2021 global Pegasus Project revelations rattled the world as a list containing thousands of potential "infections" of high-profile public figures was leaked.

Contagion and its corresponding terror are mapped in the immersive installation, entitled *Digital Violence: The Spatial Database* presented at the MAC. We are brought into the workings of an ever-expanding digital platform visualizing over a thousand data points documenting digital infections and physical attacks, as well as other related incidents. A sense of pervasive menace is heightened by an accompanying data sonification, a collaboration with renowned musician and producer Brian Eno.

Collectively titled "The Pegasus Stories," the six videos in the platform, which give voice to activists who have been targeted with Pegasus, anchor the investigation in the lives of real people and their grounded struggles. Narrated by Edward Snowden, renowned whistleblower and President of the Freedom of the Press Foundation, these videos are the first of their kind to point to the human cost in the intersection between state and corporate surveillance.

*Terror Contagion* also includes Forensic Architecture's investigation into NSO Group's COVID-19 contact-tracing technology named "Fleming." It examines a sample of a database left unprotected by NSO containing tens of thousands of entries of personal data in time and space belonging to unsuspecting civilians. Significantly, the exposed data included location information from countries in which NSO's Pegasus spyware was reportedly used, the source of which remains unexplained.

The exhibition also features a new film by acclaimed documentary filmmaker and artist Laura Poitras, a long-time collaborator of Forensic Architecture, who accompanied the research agency throughout the investigative process. Poitras's film is part of an anthology of short films, *The Year of the Everlasting Storm*, executive produced by renowned Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi. Poitras won the Pulitzer Prize for her reporting on Snowden's historic leaks of the US National Security Agency's domestic and global mass surveillance program in 2013, documented in her chilling Academy-award winning film *Citizenfour*. Poitras has herself experienced invasive surveillance by different US agencies and, as recently revealed, high-level CIA officials had lobbied to designate Poitras as an "agent of foreign power" to pave the way for her prosecution.

Working across the disciplinary boundaries of art, activism, architecture and investigative journalism, the London-based research collective Forensic Architecture produces audiovisual analysis and documentation of worldwide human rights violations, environmental crimes and state, police and corporate violence. Over the past decade, Forensic Architecture has undertaken over seventy forensic investigations to counter official narratives of contentious incidents, with and on behalf of the communities affected and human rights groups, and often for use in citizen tribunals and law courts.





Forensic Architecture  
**Digital Violence: How the NSO Group Enables State Terror**  
(detail; Platform), 2021  
© Forensic Architecture, 2021

The exhibition concludes with two related projects by Forensic Architecture. Firstly, *The Enforced Disappearance of the Ayotzinapa Students*, which investigated the horrific attack on a group of student teachers in the town of Iguala, Mexico. The assailants were local police, in collusion with criminal organizations, and other branches of the Mexican security forces, including state and federal police and the military. At the end of a night that has become an indelible and defining moment in the history of modern Mexico, six people were dead, forty wounded, and forty-three students were forcibly disappeared. The whereabouts of those students remains unknown.

Reporting in 2017 by The Citizen Lab revealed that members of Centro Prodh—Forensic Architecture’s collaborators in investigating the

Forensic Architecture  
**Digital Violence: How the NSO Group Enables State Terror**  
(detail; Pegasus Stories), 2021  
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disappearance of the Mexican students—had been hacked using Pegasus.

In the Ayotzinapa investigation, Forensic Architecture showed how the lead Federal investigator on this case—Tomás Zerón de Lucio—relied on confessions extracted under torture to manipulate the accounts of the disappearance of the students. It was Zerón’s office that had reportedly purchased a license of NSO’s Pegasus, likely to surveil Forensic Architecture’s Mexican partners.

Zerón was subsequently charged by the incoming Mexican administration with torture and enforced disappearance. He was issued an INTERPOL arrest warrant and fled Mexico, first entering Canada. His last recorded movement was in August 2019 in Israel, where he is believed to be currently hiding. Forensic Architecture is



at present working with the parents of the disappeared students to call for Zerón’s extradition to Mexico.

Most recently, in November 2021, we learned that Forensic Architecture’s partners at the Palestinian human rights organization Al-Haq, in Ramallah, were also targeted by Pegasus. We therefore include *The Extrajudicial Execution of*

*Ahmad Erekat*, an investigation made in collaboration with the NGO, and at the request of the Erekat family, of the death of 26-year-old Ahmad Erekat shot by Israeli forces after his car crashed into a booth at a checkpoint in the West Bank.



**Terror Contagion**  
Exhibition by Forensic Architecture,  
co-produced with the  
Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal.

**In Collaboration with**  
Laura Poitras/Praxis Films

**Supported by**  
The Citizen Lab  
Amnesty International

**Data Sonification**  
Brian Eno

**Narration**  
Edward Snowden

**Editing**  
Sarah Su (Sound)  
Bethany Edgoose (Video)

**Additional Support**  
Eyebeam Center for the Future of Journalism,  
CyberPeace Institute, Amnesty International

Exhibition organized by John Zeppetelli  
with Lesley Johnstone, Geneviève Senécal  
and Denis Labelle

Public programs: François LeTourneux and  
Shourideh C. Molavi

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Opening Conference

*Terror Contagion*: A Conversation with Eyal Weizman, Laura Poitras and Shourideh C. Molavi. Introduced and moderated by John Zeppetelli.

Le Gesù (1202, Bleury Street)

Wednesday, December 1, 6 p.m., in English

Walkthrough

With John Zeppetelli, Director and Chief Curator of the MAC and curator of the exhibition.

Visit in French: Wednesday, December 15, 2021, 5 p.m.

Visit in English: Wednesday, January 12, 2022, 5 p.m.

Max and Iris Stern International Symposium

The fourteenth Max and Iris Stern International Symposium, presented in March 2022, will bring together a broad panel of international figures to discuss the activities of the NSO Group in the context of global cyber-weapons. The event will include the participation of targeted civil society figures speaking about the new terrain of warfare against human rights work. Participants will also discuss the issue of accountability in the art world, among other topics.

ART MEDIATOR IN THE GALLERIES

An art mediator is present in the galleries three times a week to exchange with visitors on the issues raised by the exhibition and to answer questions.

Bilingual interactive tours are offered without reservation during these periods.

SCHEDULE

Thursday

Presence of an art mediator from 4 to 7 p.m.

Interactive tour at 5:30 p.m.

Friday

Presence of an art mediator from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Interactive tour at 12 p.m.

Saturday

Presence of an art mediator from 2 to 5 p.m.

Interactive tour at 3 p.m.

Tours are also offered by reservation for groups of 10 or more.

Reservations and information at 514 847-6253 / reservation.education@macm.org

Please visit the Musée's website for more details and other events to come.

Cover

Forensic Architecture

**Digital Violence:**

**How the NSO Group Enables State Terror**

(detail; Platform), 2021

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