

Perspecta 51

Medium

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I

A couple in their mid-fifties drives down a country road in silence. A young man in his early twenties stands in front of a train shelter with his rucksack, dressed in military uniform, facing the road. The car, a silver BMW X3, pulls up to the shelter area and slows to a stop. The boyish figure has disappeared. The couple, confused, dial a number on their phone yet receive no answer. It's a brisk winter day. Leaves have fallen off the trees, revealing traditional, mid-twentieth century, white German houses with pitched roofs in the distance. The older man steps out of the car. Looking around, he wanders up to the shelter. Back to the car with a look of confusion, when the young man jumps out from behind the shelter's full-height aluminum walls and onto the back of the older man, surprising him. They embrace. The older man, gesturing to the woman in the car, asks about the boy's bag. Pausing, with his eyes suspiciously darting across the frame, the young man replies: "I must have lost it." "Did it have anything valuable in it?" the older man asks. "Just my ID," he responds. Grabbing his crotch, he continues: "I have all my valuables right here." The two walk back to the car, where the woman steps out to take the young man into her arms. Cut.

Nick Axel

Architectures of
Behavior

At home, the older man welcomes the boy into the bedroom of a teenager, with black-light posters on the wall and unsmoked joints on the desk. "Just as you left it." Walking in with a gleaming smile, the older man asks whether the young man has been taking care of himself. Continuing to smile, the older man raises his hand up to the boy's mouth and begins to touch his teeth. With his gaze fixed, the older man inspects the inside of the boy's mouth. He stops and he tells the boy to clean himself up. Cut.

The three sit around a long wooden dinner table with a gold-rimmed porcelain table setting. Night has fallen. The boy, having changed clothes, jovially recounts a story from his time in Afghanistan in which two members from a bedouin family are killed after running into a fellow soldier urinating in the bush and how the situation was redressed by giving the family two goats and an Audi. The three laugh. Sitting back, the man takes a sip of his wine, the woman gets up to go into the kitchen, and the boy takes another bite of food. Brussels sprouts, spätzle, and pork. On her way back in, she sits down next to the young man. Turning towards him, the woman presses her body firmly up against his and moves her mouth, eyes closed, towards his neck. Cut.

The couple drives down a country road in silence. The woman glances over toward the older man driving. A young man, a different young man, stands in front of a train shelter with his rucksack, dressed in military uniform, facing the road. As the car pulls up, both the man and woman get out of the car and begin walking toward the boy. He appears more frail, less confident and slightly more troubled than the previous person who occupied this place. The man walks up to the boy to hug him. The woman follows suit. Holding the young man in her arms, they both start to cry. Arriving back home, the older man leaves the boy in the bedroom. Sitting down on the bed, he looks around and picks up a sketchpad. Flipping through it animates a man's arm ripping off a woman's burka, only to find another one beneath it. The arm keeps trying to unveil the woman, only to reveal more burkas. The background moves as the scenes repeat, giving the impression that the two figures are moving. The three sit around the dinner table. They eat, talk, and drink. The spätzle starts moving, turning into maggots; the Brussels sprouts into eyeballs. "Don't you like it?" the woman asks. The conversation continues with a sorrowful overtone. The couple moves to seduce the boy. Cut.

The couple drives down the country road in silence. A camel appears ahead blocking the way. The car stops. They stare, confused. A young man, a different young man, stands in front of a train shelter with his rucksack, dressed in military uniform, facing the road. The car pulls up to the shelter area and comes to a stop. The couple gets out. They embrace. They return home, eat, talk, and drink. The couple gets into a disagreement. Nonetheless, seduction ensues. Cut.

Omer Fast's *Continuity* (2016)¹ is a film without beginning or end. If you watch it for long enough, you will eventually see something you've already seen. The film itself is a series of repetitions. The characters stay the same. Two of the people are the same. The car, the train shelter, the bedroom, the dinner table, are the same. The sequence of events repeat, yet the performance is different every time. The single foreign element—the young man—triggers a chain reaction, unleashing a dynamic set of forces and unknown variables. Repetition is never simply repetition. Repetition is always, in the words of Tom McCarthy, one of Fast's closest interlocutors, *reenactment*.² As part of the architecture for Fast's 2016 exhibition at Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, *Talking is not always the solution*, Studio Miessen designed a series of three waiting rooms to punctuate black box screening rooms at regular intervals. Each was designed to mimic a distinct and recognizable space of control, from an immigration office in Berlin to an economy-class airport lounge and a doctor's office, and in so doing give form to a corresponding existential condition of discomfort.

Studio Miessen collaborated with the scenographer Heike Schupelius to exhaustively detail each waiting room typology with their respective accoutrements, from broken vending machines to empty chip bags, tacky plants, strewn newspapers, cheap reading material, and children's play areas. The phenomenological blurring of architecture and scenography, between exhibition space and the referent, results in a disjunctive, at times disturbing, experience. Yet the space of disjunction produced by the waiting rooms is not simply predicated on identity, but also, perhaps more importantly, difference and distinction. Through its relationship with the ideal, the idea of a perfect copy, reenactment opens a space for critical positions to be taken and pronounced. We should thus understand the concept of *repetition* to be categorically distinct from that of *reenactment*. Repetition is deceptive not for its appearance of similitude, but rather for its impression of ease. While reenactment allows for intent and agency to be read, repetition, as a Platonic ideal, attempts to erase any trace of difference.

Repetition is thus predicated on control, for which we can understand the laboratory to be the spatial type, or architectural apparatus, for engendering such conditions. From the white coats to the ventilation systems and airlock chambers, everything in the lab is designed to minimize irregularity and difference in the space of the experiment, be it a petri dish or hadron collider, so as to allow for its repetition. Taken one step further, we could say that the design of a laboratory is married to the material being experimented with, whether bacteria, particles, or currents. Toward these ends, domestic architecture has not only been implicated within but is a determining factor of experiments in behavioral science that endeavor to study the human animal. Infamously, the Milgram experiment of 1961 was constituted by the figure of authority, but perhaps more importantly by the wall of glass that physically—though not visually or aurally—separated the subject administering the electrical shocks from the one supposedly receiving them.

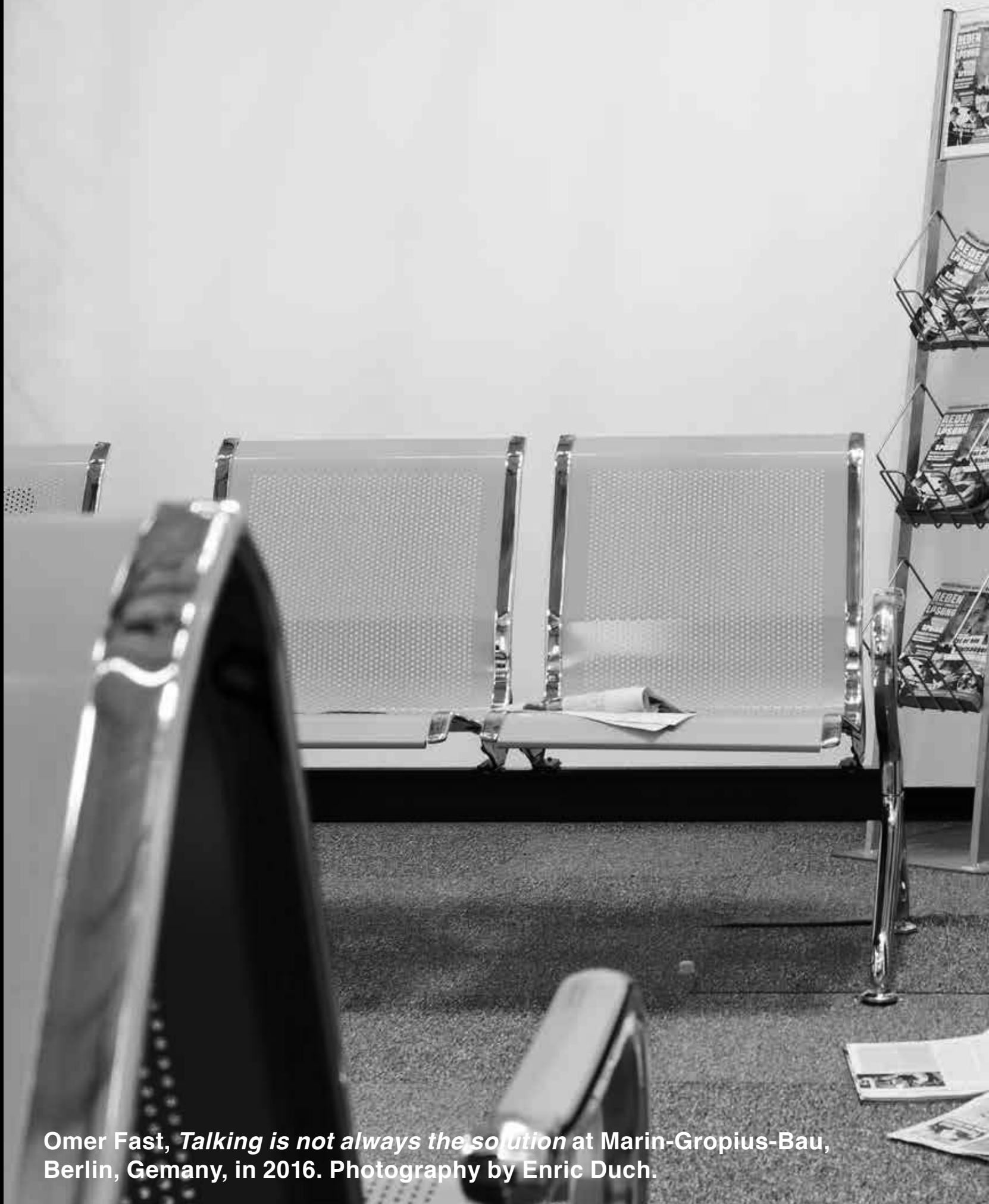
From modulating each room's light, temperature, and humidity, to calibrating every object's frame and intended viewing position, the museum is predicated on control. This architectural mediation is, so it seems, essential for the production and legitimation of knowledge. Yet unlike the architectural death drive of science, one that seeks to negate its existence as much as is technically possible, contemporary art institutions use the relationship between architectural form and artistic content as a source for curatorial experimentation. The gallery walls that Willem Sandberg first painted white were constitutive of artistic intent, such as with the raw affect of abstract expressionism, and a source of artistic material, such as with the work of institutional critique. The work of Studio Miessen not only reflects on this understanding of architecture as a historically burdened device of sociopolitical mediation, but rehearses new systems of relation and forms of behavior.

- 1 Omer Fast, *Continuity* (2012, video, 40 mins.), originally commissioned for Documenta 13, Kassel, Germany, 2012.
- 2 Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (New York: Vintage, 2005).



Omer Fast, *Talking is not always the solution* at Marin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, Germany, in 2016. Photography by Enric Duch.





Omer Fast, *Talking is not always the solution* at Marin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, Germany, in 2016. Photography by Enric Duch.





Omer Fast, *Talking is not always the solution* at Marin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, Germany, in 2016. Photography by Enric Duch.





Omer Fast, *Talking is not always the solution* at Marin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, Germany, in 2016. Photography by Enric Duch.



II

Since 2007, Studio Miessen has produced a series of architectural works that reconfigure familiar institutional environments to engender a space of intensified perception, reflection, and action. Miessen's interventions collapse the distinction between observer and observed and create an anarchic laboratory where the architecture of social relations and personal identity is revealed through the understanding of habitual behavior as cultured performance. Designed to the scale of the human body, these spaces intervene in individual and collective habits of spatial occupation and interpersonal relation. In *The Violence of Participation* (2007), for instance, six vertical partitions divide a table's circular shape to constrain the field of view of whoever sits down. Sized so that only one person can occupy each section at a time, peripheral distraction is minimized, and focus is forced on what is directly in front: either the contents on the table or whoever sits directly across. This puts the ability to maintain dialogue—not just verbal, but also more subtle forms of sustained communication such as mental concentration, eye contact, and body language—to the test. Similarly, the “inverted pyramid” of *Archive Kabinett* (2009–11), designed in collaboration with architects Magnus Nilsson and Ralf Pflugfelder, draws out the metaphysical implications of sharing space. With an area of no more than eighteen square meters, the room played host to discursive events such as book launches, presentations and exhibitions. The steps surrounding its perimeter were capable of holding forty-five people; this incredible proximity and density of bodies transforms even the most mundane movements or gestures into highly reflective and performative acts. The configuration forces an intimate understanding that any act, from entering the room to looking around, deciding where to go to actually getting there, sitting down to shifting seated positions, gazing off into space to taking notes, conversing to standing up to leave, affects others' states of being. All are forced to confront their egos and reflect upon private desires, becoming hyper-aware of their positions as individuals within an organized group of people, that thing that might have once been referred to as society. Studio Miessen's work presents architecture as that which organizes, as that which indiscriminately subjects, as that which both creates common conditions and the conditions of the commons.

Both the *Violence* table and the *Kabinett* room are “secret” architectures. They operate without the consent or awareness of those who inhabit them. They appropriate and displace performative intention, be it to read something or attend an event. Form confronts the norm. While in these two instances behavior is understood in perhaps its most literal manner—the minute gestures and movements of the body—social and behavioral norms also play out in less immediate, more drawn-out fashion. Museums, for instance, bring together and mediate the relations between a diverse and multi-tiered set of stakeholders, each with distinct and at times conflicting agendas, toward a common goal: the exhibition itself. As the moment in which these sets of relations and layers of mediation effectively collapse, artists are both privileged and constrained by the institution they enter. Studio Miessen’s contribution to the 2016 exhibition titled *Conditions of Political Choreography* at the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA), Tel Aviv, does not so much deconstruct the institutional framework of the collective exhibition as it embeds architectural form within its constitutive process in order to shape it, to mold it.

A group exhibition is a spatial problem. With nine other artists situated in a single double-height space, Studio Miessen shrouded the room with a continuous plywood surface, a tight quarter-pipe structure fit to the dimensions of the space. Acting as a new common datum, architecture became the intermediary device around (and on top of) which collective negotiations over the use of the space took place. Who is to use what, when, and where? The performance work, as a result, came to be defined by the architecture it occupied, from the structural support of the 90-degree upturn to the floor, the balcony, the stairs, the bleachers off to the sides, or even the tables out front, thus extending the performative consciousness of architecture beyond the limits of the installation itself.

Not unlike the inclined planes of Claude Parent and Paul Virilio’s *Oblique Function* (1970), the quarter-pipe is a deceptively simple architectural form that displaces the normative relationship of the body to the ground—bound by gravity and the upright nature of the human skeleton—and forces a new, temporary equilibrium. While at the CCA the radius of the quarter-pipe was compact, leaving plenty

of horizontal space for (gravitationally normative) performance and the monumental presence of a plywood wall, when the form was first deployed two years earlier as a part of Hito Steyerl's 2014–15 mid-career retrospective tour, it was articulated with a significantly larger radius to draw out the geometry's destabilizing potential. The quarter-pipe was originally designed as the architecture of *Liquidity Inc.* (2014), a video work that treated the instability of labor, value, and desire by tracing the journey of an orphan from the Vietnam War from his job as a high-frequency stock trader to a mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter. At *Artists Space*, New York, in 2015, the architecture stood at an oblique as a discrete object in the center of a large, square room. Enlarged to the height of the space and surfaced with a padded vinyl-covered foam typically used on the walls of gyms, the fillet radius served as the designated area, common amongst lengthy video installations, for people who do not want to stand to sit and watch. Beanbags scattered on top became islands of precarious balance in a sea of gravitational instability, where even the slightest of movements or subtlest of waves might offset the equilibrium found between body and architecture and give it reason to be sought again.

The potential for architecture to mediate the relation between a body and its immediate environment can extend beyond the scale of the anthropological figure to society more widely, through its institutions and the city. *European Kunsthalle* (2007) was a project for a new art institution in Cologne, Germany, that sought to re-conceive the form of the museum as a spatial construct. The Kunsthalle existed as intent. As a typology, the Kunsthalle is an archetypal European art institution that is pure exhibition space. It differs from a museum in that it does not own and have built space for the maintenance of an archive or permanent collection, but instead depends on the circulation of artworks for a perpetuity of temporary exhibitions. The *European Kunsthalle* had yet to manifest itself in Cologne or any other city; as a project, it existed solely as intent. The question thus became what spatial or architectural form is most suitable for such an institution?

With a 2007 research project entitled *Spaces of Production*, undertaken in collaboration with Nikolaus Hirsch, Philipp Misselwitz, and

Matthias Görlich, the project held the idea of a building was held in abeyance and its program instead distributed throughout the city in a choreographed route. At the same time, the project sought to explore the abstract nature of the Kunsthalle as an architectural typology, a space for the exhibition of unknown artworks. By critically examining the relationship between artwork (content) and its architecture (the container), the institution building was designed as an endless interior of disjointed and fragmented volumes, offering a near infinite potential for the artistic and curatorial territorialization of space.

While speculative, *Spaces of Production* signified a delicate and creative attunement to both the conditions and constraints of the art institution. Ever since, Studio Miessen has been commissioned to rethink and redesign the performative logic of these institutions—museums, galleries, foundations, -ennials, and other cultural initiatives—by way of their architectural form and spatial manifestations. For Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, in 2014, for instance, Miessen “punched holes onto the street” with windows four-and-a-half-meters tall (nearly fifteen feet), granting its ground-floor exhibition space a public, pedestrian presence. *Discursive Sauna* (2014), a project for Art Sonje Center, Seoul, was designed to allow the institution’s public program to continue while the building was under construction. By severing the traditional socio-spatial relations between the audience of an event and its speakers—relegating the former to a lecture hall underneath the museum, the latter to an inverted pyramid reenactment placed out front, and connecting the two via video link—the respectively alienating conditions of spectator and performer were pushed toward their logical extreme. Even further behind the scenes, Miessen was commissioned to write policy and reenvision one Pristina’s most important and politically contested public spaces, the Kosova National Art Gallery, for which he brought local experts together with foreign agents to frame the institution within narratives both local and international.



***The Violence of Participation* at the 2007 Lyon Biennale of Contemporary Art, Lyon, France. Photography by Markus Miessen.**





***Archive Kabinett* with Magnus Nilsson and Ralf Pflugfelder (nOffice). Completed in 2011 at Archive Books in Berlin, Germany. Photography by Ciara Figone.**





Conditions of Political Choreography at the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Tel Aviv, Israel, 2016.





Hito Steyerl, *Retrospective Exhibition* at Artists Space, New York, 2015.





**Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam,
the Netherlands, 2014. Photography by Bob Goedewaagen.**

III

It is not expertise that has granted Miessen permission to occupy the infrastructural position he has, but rather a sensitivity to institutional context. Yet Miessen's immersion within such contexts is not one of subjugation and subsumption, but instead performs the adversarial position Chantal Mouffe advocates for as "agonism," a philosophy that understands conflict and the discrimination between friend and enemy as essential and ineradicable to politics. Agonism is a curious political philosophy in that its rejection of consensus (as an ideal) and acceptance of antagonism (as social nature) allows for a form of democracy to be envisioned that is both more accepting of and less violent toward difference.³ Furthermore, Miessen has drawn from the political architecture of the British House of Lords and the presence of the "crossbenchers," members of Parliament who sit between and perpendicular to the government and opposition benches, not aligning themselves to any particular party.⁴ Since its foundation in 2004, Miessen's practice has firmly come to occupy the position of an outsider within a widely expanded (and expanding) field of spatial practice. As an outsider, Miessen is invited to see what cannot be seen from within, to look beyond vested interests, and is charged with defining the horizons of commonality. One could argue that the site of Miessen's practice is the brief itself: opening the project up to a wider set of stakeholders, processes, actors, agents, interests, and concerns, and revealing previously unimaginable relations and techniques for their performative enactment.

Miessen's practice recursively operates on a set of concepts and principles that actively constitute the performance, our understanding, and our position in relation to contemporary society and its institutions, such as consensus, conflict, participation, boundaries, the archive, assembly, and agency. His work moves fluidly between spatial proposition, formal intervention, and theoretical observation, a dynamic that can be seen even in its earliest projects, such as *Substitute* (2004), his diploma project at the Architectural Association in London under Carlos Villanueva Brandt, and *Did Someone Say Participate?* (2006), a book published with Shumon Basar as the result of his master's degree at the London Consortium. The former was an experimental participatory project on the health providence

system for recovering heroin addicts in Kings Cross, London. Miessen mediated the divergent interests and conflicting concerns of the system's agents and stakeholders—from users to the local governing authority—to rearticulate the infrastructure of methadone's distribution, and in so doing make it available to more citizens who were hitherto excluded and disenfranchised by governance mechanisms such as municipal registration. The latter was an edited volume of texts that sought to expand architecture's disciplinary understanding of participation. Instead of focusing on inclusive, bottom-up or grassroots initiatives, contributions focused largely on mechanisms of exclusion and obstruction. Participation was thus framed not as a design project to be invented or willed, but rather as a way to see the always already preexisting political conditions of society and space, which are inherently contingent and insecure as such.

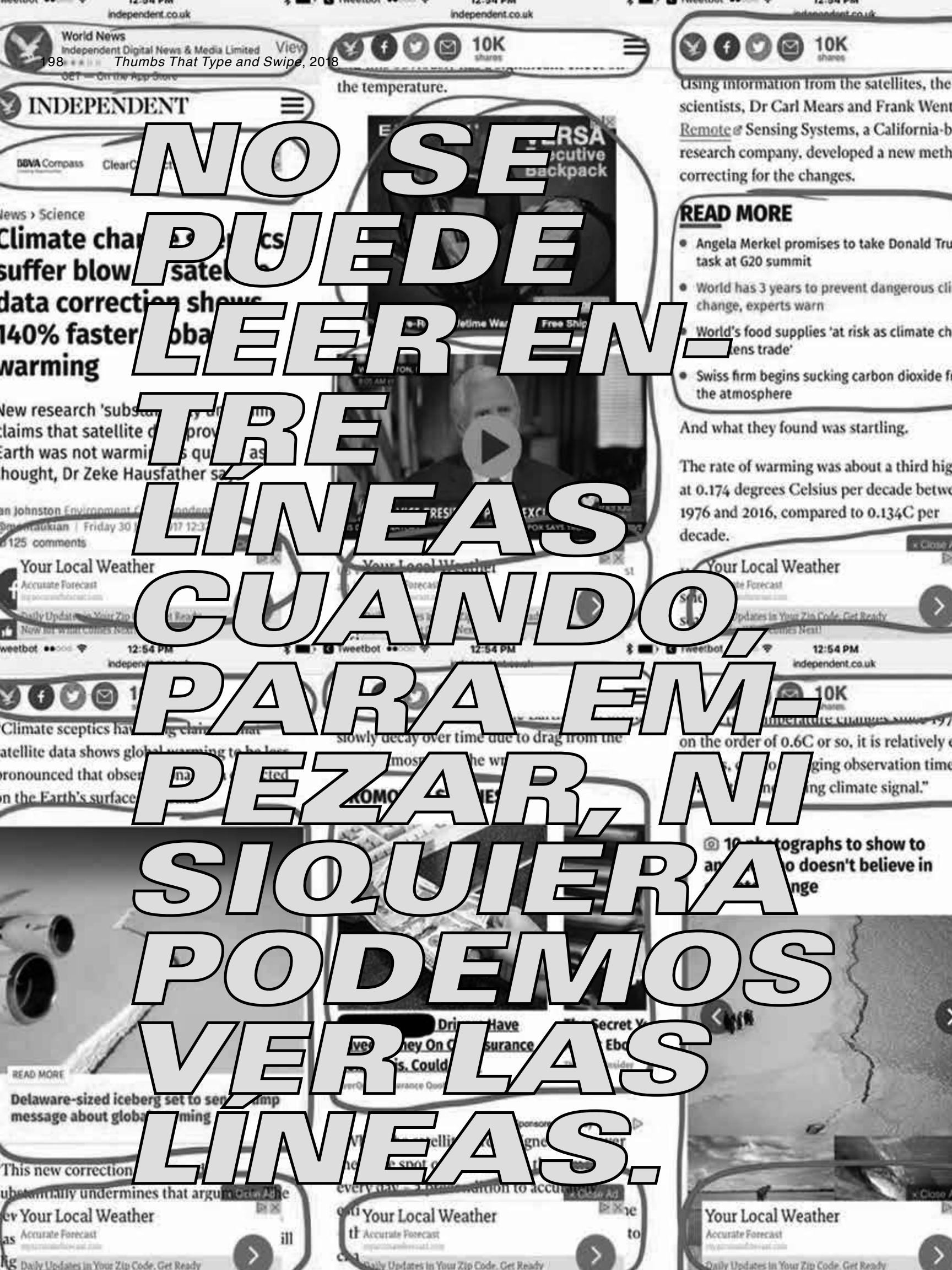
While a vanguard in the contemporary debate on the architect's political agency, the architectural practice of Studio Miessen can be situated within a much longer disciplinary history on the critical agency of form, and in particular what Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley—with reference to one of Bernard Tschumi's later *Advertisements for Architecture* (1977)—have recently termed “Perverse Design.”⁵ Underneath a photograph of a woman in bondage, Tschumi writes, “The game of architecture is an intricate play with rules that you may break or accept. These rules ... have [an] erotic significance.” Where Tschumi identified architecture as being bound by “so many knots that cannot be untied,”⁶ Miessen demonstrates that architecture and spatial practice more widely can be the very means by which they can. Beyond this, Miessen's installation work provides context for the transgressive pleasure Tschumi saw in the liminal space between form and program.

Whereas Tschumi inherited both the idealism and formalism of his generation, Miessen is a pragmatist, and radically so. While there are no pole-vaulters in his catacombs, Miessen's architecture nonetheless reveals the performativity—the limits, the norms, the potential, the essentiality—of bodies in space: how we see, how we think, how we move, how we speak, how we act, how we want, how we do, how

we don't. The architecture of Studio Miessen can be seen to interrogate the normative architectures of behavior and reflect upon the metaphysical performance of everyday sociality. If, in the words of Colomina and Wigley, "design is always the design of the human," Miessen's architecture potentiates the redesign of the human; it positions us as the scientists in control of that unruly substance of ours called life. It is reflective in that it reveals ourselves as we have been designed, and critical in that it points toward what, if not how, we want to be. Provoking the self out of its slumber of complacent habit, this experience of existential disjunction ultimately constitutes the present as a historic moment, allowing for a distinction to be made—if made by the agency of the individual—between everything that came before and whatever we want to come after.

- 3 Chantal Mouffe and Markus Miessen, *The Space of Agonism*, ed. Nikolaus Hirsch and Markus Miessen, *Critical Spatial Practice 2* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).
- 4 Miessen has transformed the crossbenchers and their theoretical position of participatory non-allegiance into a figure of spatial practice with doctoral research at the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths, and a book: Markus Miessen, *Crossbenching* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).
- 5 Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, *Are We Human? Notes on an Archaeology of Design* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016).
- 6 Bernard Tschumi, *Advertisements for Architecture*, 1976–77, postcard-sized images. <http://www.tschumi.com/projects/19/>.

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