IMAGE-SECTIONS: THE EVIDENTIARY CAPACITY OF IMAGES TO SAMPLE THE LIFEWORLD AND HAVE AN OPERATIVE LIFE

Christina Varvia (Images by Amel Alzakout)

On 28 October 2015, Amel Alzakout boarded a small wooden boat at the coast of Turkey travelling to Greece. Her fellow passengers were Syrian, Iraqi, Iranian, Afghan, Lebanese, and Kurdish asylum seekers as well as a smuggler who was paid generously to transfer them to the European shores. Half-way through the journey, before crossing into Greek waters, another boat approached them, the smuggler abandoned the boat, putting one of the passengers (with no seafaring experience) in charge of steering. The waves were high. The boat crossed into Greek waters and started rocking intensely struggling with the weight of over 300 passengers, until the top deck collapsed and the whole structure tipped over and broke. The wreck was the deadliest incident of the Aegean Sea's recent history, with at least 43 people losing their lives. It happened at the height of what is now referred to as the "long summer of migration," in 2015, when approximately one million people crossed into Greece to find refuge in Europe.

As the rescue operation was underway, locals, volunteers, and humanitarian workers came to Eftalou port in Lesvos to help. It was the year when solidarity networks were at their strongest, locals opened their homes and did everything in their power to assist those struggling to reach safety.[1] Photo-reporters and volunteers captured images and videos of the tragic moments after the wreck, and published them on mainstream and social media as a plea for help. These images contributed towards the narrative of the so called "migration crisis" portraying people as bodies under stress, capturing the tragedy of death. The circulation and economy of these images fuelled political debates in Greece and Europe. Some argued for governments' duty of care to provide support, while others were advocating for closed borders.

Although images of the people's arrival to the port were plentiful, the perspectives capturing the shipwreck itself and the subsequent rescue operation at sea were limited and very specific. One of those perspectives was Amel's camera, a water-resistant video camera that she attached to her wrist in order to

record her journey and share with her partner who was waiting for her in Germany. I met Amel in 2017 and she generously showed me and my colleague Stefanos Levidis the footage of the wreck she captured. As we were watching the footage at her house, we witnessed an incredible perspective, one that she herself did not recognise—as she often remarks, the distance between her eyes and the lens attached to her wrist was vast. The video clips she produced captured her entire journey, from the smugglers' office, to the bus that took them from Istanbul to the coast, walking towards the beach and the boat, boarding the boat, the smuggler abandoning them, and then the moment of the boat breaking, falling into water, people screaming, staying afloat, catching her breath, and then hours of drift, underwater scenes of legs floating upside down, pieces of wood, cigarettes, nappies, lifejackets suspended as if in outer space, the rescue operation from within the sea, and finally the shore again. Her footage, one of the most incredible pieces of visual documentation that I have ever come across, is cut into clips—either because she purposefully stopped recording, or because her movements inadvertently turned off the shutter switch, and the camera remained off until Amel realised and pressed "record" again. Though her unique high-resolution perspective is of immense value to the understanding of the incident, the fact that her videos offer an intermittent record, often too shaky to decipher, make the reading of the incident hard.

Amel asked Forensic Architecture to study her footage and to find other perspectives that would complete her understanding of what happened that day. Why did the rescue operation take so long? Why was there so much death at a passage that so many were watching? We collected all available footage of the rescue operation and tried to stitch it together. The wreck and the rescue were captured by activists on the Lesvos shore zooming in on their phones and producing grainy videos. The rescue was also captured by the artist Richard Mosse, who had hired a military telescopic thermal camera to record the arrival of migrant boats. His choice of camera was meant to demonstrate the gradual militarisation of the border through the aesthetic of the lens itself, and allowed the artist to record in detail the rescue operation from afar, capturing the bodies of the travellers floating in the sea as darker pixels registering higher heat values. The rescue was also captured by professional photographer and activist Mikel Konate, who jumped on one of the fishing boats that headed to the scene of the wreck to help with the rescue. Lastly, it was also captured by the Go-Pro head-mounted camera of one of the captains of the

Greek Coastguard. Based on these perspectives we were able to piece together the timing and positions of the Greek Coastguard, Frontex (the EU border agency), ProActiva Open Arms (an NGO of lifeguards), and the local fishermen who arrived at the scene and were all part of the rescue operation.

I start with this incident because the way it was captured through images, whether moving or still, is telling of the evidentiary capacity of images, as well as their representational challenge. I will argue that images are sections, sampled frames out of the complex space and fluid time. And treating them as sections allows for multiple forms of investigative practice.

I.

"In reference to architectural drawing, the term *section* typically describes a cut through the body of a building, perpendicular to the horizon line. A section drawing is one that shows a vertical cut transecting, typically along a primary axis, an object or building. The section reveals simultaneously its interior and exterior profiles, the interior space and the material, membrane, or wall that separates interior from exterior, providing a view of the object that is not usually seen."[2]

In a first reading, one would easily protest that photographic images[3] do not have the capacity to cut through matter to reveal interiors. They are also not orthographic drawings arranged perpendicular to the horizon line. Yet thinking about Amel's footage, we might reconsider. Her camera plane cuts through the scene bringing us into visceral proximity of the horizon which is captured in its full materiality. Far from following orthographic perspectives, the organic way of her arm moving dips the camera in and out of the water, scanning above and below the horizon line. Though typically we consider the horizon as a perfectly straight datum line marking the threshold between sea and sky, Amel's positionality in relation to that line—most of her body under while her head struggles to stay above—reveals its complex fluid geometry. By inhabiting the threshold, Amel keeps slicing through the physical environment (both fluid and gaseous), producing visual and auditory sections that capture spatial information.

Like architectural sections, images are indexical, they structure information onto a canvas according to a set of rules: frame, resolution, perspective, contrast, saturation. Within this analogy, we could also consider the plane of the photograph

as the linear axis of the cut. Architectural drawings, whether plans, sections, elevations, isometrics, or perspectives always utilise the cut as a critical positioning tool that enables framing. Orthographic projection allows the depicted spatial information to become easily measurable, yet other types of perspectival projections are not uncommon in these types of drawings. In a similar act of dissecting, the camera shutter cuts through a scene flattening what is within the frame and discarding what is outside. In doing so, the camera exercises the power of exclusion, it parcels out information and packages it in mediatic objects. Like an architectural drawing, an image-section has directionality, it is blind to its back. The resulting image, which has a similar relationship to the lifeworld as the section—a part to the whole—retains information that is measurable, retrievable, and most importantly, actionable.

Which leads us to the crucial similarity of images and architectural sections: their social life. Like sections, images used for evidentiary purposes organise communities of practice. Architectural sections are read by surveyors, designers, builders, and craftsmen of different kinds—they become the interface of these people's interaction. Images are cartographies, grounded in their specificity: they "…fulfil a methodological function by providing discursive objects of exchange for a dialogical, but also potentially antagonistic exchange."[4] An image creates a pause, it offers the opportunity of study, it facilitates concentration. Whether read by art critics, researchers, journalists, judges, forensic experts, politicians, artists, or the general public, an image becomes an anchor for conversation, debate, contestation, and imagination.

The indexical capacity of images offers the possibility of two kinds of practices facilitated by the study, one facing forward and one backwards. On the one hand, an image is a document, a specimen that has come in contact with "what happened" and thus can act as a survey. Like architectural sections, image-sections are also studied to derive spatial and temporal details, or an understanding of the state of affairs, from the information that is organised on the image canvas; they therefore facilitate investigation and consist of what Thomas Keenan refers to as "truth-claim making machine(s)."[5] Far from "objective," these images and their relationship to the original scene they depict are highly contested. Investigation and analysis can thus lead to very different readings of the image and different claims derived from it. At the same time, an image-section is a cartographic depiction

that allows for the planning of future operations: investigation leads to intervention, the forward-facing function of images. To paraphrase Rosi Braidotti, a cartography is the record of both what an entity ceases to be and what it is in the process of becoming.[6] Images' ability to instigate action, which will eventually change the lifeworld they depict, is what most often referred to as their operative function.

This is most explicit in science images, and particularly, medical imagery. There, images cut not through a building, but through the body of an organism revealing its complex materiality. X-rays were the first radiographs to render the interior of the body by reading the density of matter, blurring the skin as a rigid barrier. An X-ray cuts through the body by being sensitised to density. In so doing, it reveals a cartography of the body's interior which is used both for investigation, the diagnosis of the cause of illness, and for the planning of future interventions. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computerised tomography (CT) scans are sections par excellence. They offer sliced views of the human (or other animal) body, capturing the material composition of the interior. In this process the medical images reveal the organism's structure, density, flow. The creation of representational sections of the body facilitates study and conversation between different medical experts, who can diagnose but also intervene. The "compositional interpretation"[7] of an image by doctors leads to decisions that deal with matters of life and death in a very tangible and immediate way. Medical images offer evidence that informs decisions on pharmaceutical or surgical interventions and what we traditionally call operations.

II.

The relationship between images and operations has most famously been explored by Haroun Farocki who analysed the way the production of images informs military action. In his formulation of operational images, Farocki described images that are not necessarily meant for human eyes, but rather they are part of a machinic process. In his online catalogue Farocki notes: "The third part of the Eye/Machine cycle structures the material around the concept of the operational image. These are images which do not portray a process, but are themselves part of a process."[8] Though the type of images that are meant only for machinic eyes is not what is at stake in this paper, the question of images in relation to operations is central to it. Farocki used

the term *operational* images rather than *operative*, a detail that later scholarship often misses, using *operational* and *operative* interchangeably. There is, however, a slight yet important distinction between these two terms. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines them as following:

operational[9]
adjective

op· er· a· tion· al | \ ˌä-pə-ˈrā-shnəl, -shə-nᵊl \
Definition of operational
1: of or relating to operation or to an operation
    //the operational gap between planning and production
2: of, relating to, or based on operations
3 a: of, engaged in, or connected with execution of military or naval operations in campaign or battle
    b: ready for or in condition to undertake a destined function

operative[10]
adjective

op· er· a· tive | \ ˈä-p(ə-)rə-tiv, ˈä-pə-ˌrā- \

1a: producing an appropriate effect : EFFICACIOUS
    //operative techniques
b: most significant or essential
    //the operative word in a phrase
    //the operative facts
2: exerting force or influence : OPERATING
    //an operative statute
3a: having to do with physical operations (as of machines)
    //operative skills
b: WORKING
    //an operative craftsman
4: based on or consisting of an operation
    //operative dentistry
    //The disease may require operative treatment.

Operational is therefore an image that exists as part of an operation, its value is deduced by its position within a system of actions. Conversely, thinking about images as operative is going one step further, it is thinking about the way they instigate operations, as they allow and enact processes—they themselves

have agency. To think about operative images is to think not only about their machinic life, a cog in the wheel so to speak, but also their political life, the way they circulate, they create effect and affect, they induce reactions, and enter into forums, the way they are debated, they slip through, transmutate, and instigate revolutions. If the operational is about moving within the predetermined tracks of the machinic, the operative is that which draws new directions of action. It is the image's ability to organise operations around it.

Of course, not all images are operative and not all of them get operationalised. Images are often taken mindlessly, consumed instantaneously and disappear quickly into archival oblivion. Yet images have the potentiality to become evidentiary even if this was not their original purpose. It is not always clear what quality elevates images within the political sphere and begins their politically operative life. Their evidentiary value is often corresponding to the value of the recorded content as pure data, yet it is also in excess of that, as their visual complexity has the power of affectivity. Amel's footage is not only valuable because we can derive the times of arrival of the rescuers, it also offers an intimate perspective of a historical moment of Europe's border, as it is experienced through the body of a survivor in all of its physicality. Borrowing from Kathleen H. Pine and Max Liboiron's formulation of "charismatic data"—which refers to "the characteristic of inspiring devotion so strong that it moves an audience to action"[11]—I would argue that images present visual organisations of data that often contain the power to spur political action. Images' attachment to specificity, their cartographic quality, as well as their ability to create emotive responses can often make them "charismatic" and by extension operative, as they organise communities of practice around them.

Think of images of police violence in protests, travelling through phones and social platforms and creating incentives to organise further protests. Their mobility links political spaces, extending fields of action. By sampling the lifeworld and feeding back into it, images are not only part of a process, i.e. operational, but rather they instigate, expand, amplify, and organise processes—they are definitively operative. Think of the images derived from the shipwreck that Amel survived. Their political lives span far and wide, from local island news, to international press. From the offices of the Greek Coastguards and the European Parliament, to art galleries showing Amel's feature film,[12] Richard Mosse's installation[13] and Forensic Architecture's investigation.[14] The footage derived from that day was parsed

through and analysed, cross-referenced and spatialised, and then recomposed to offer new understandings of the event and propose a reframing of European migration policy and the aesthetics we use to discuss it. These images are charismatic because they ground the political debate about migration in the specificity of a body, the situatedness of the experience of crossing the border, and everything that unfolds from that. The images themselves act as sections that have the potential to be recomposed in any number of ways. It is precisely at the moment of their interpretation and recomposition that they become politically operative.

III.

> Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.[15]
>
> —Jacques Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics

The political life of images begins at the moment of their capture, when, in Ariella Aisha Azoulay's formulation, the shutter "commands what sort of things have to be distanced, bracketed, removed, forgotten, suppressed, ignored, overcome, and made irrelevant [...] for the photograph to be taken and for its meaning accepted."[16] To think of images as sections is to think about the politics of what they elevate into visibility and what they leave behind deeming imperceptible. From the moment of their capture, image-sections are working towards conditioning the political understanding of what is depicted by way of inclusion or exclusion, what Jacques Rancière called "distributing the sensible."

The disjuncture of images from the realities they represent (a section rather than the whole), allows their drift towards other temporal flows. Their ability to compress sections of the lifeworld, to be media, to be copied and multiplied mean that their presence affects multiple dimensions, narratives, practices, and realities at once. But in their drift, they often lose their grounding. To read a section, one is forced to think about the positionality of the slice, the location of the lens in regard to the whole. Locating the lens means situating the gaze. Insisting that the slice is not the whole, but only a sample of the whole. It does not represent the scene universally, it can only account for its own perspective, and even as such, it is conditioned by resolution, framing, object shadows, etc. Insisting on images as sections is insisting that they

alone are not enough. That there is a necessity for a multiplicity of sources in order to draw any conclusion. And that all perspectives are partial, but also embodied and embedded within the lifeworld that they sample through the visual.[17]

To work with images as evidence is like working with disparate pages of a book. A book unbound, without its cover, lacks sequence. Like loose pages, images can be assembled and reassembled not only with other images but also with other non-hegemonic types of media: sound, text, objects. Like an unassembled book, the reshuffling of images, their montage, allows for a multiplicity of narratives that offer different visions of the whole. It is this break from the structural coherence of the lifeworld that makes images act like sections. And it is in their study and the subsequent association with other materials that image-sections become most operative.

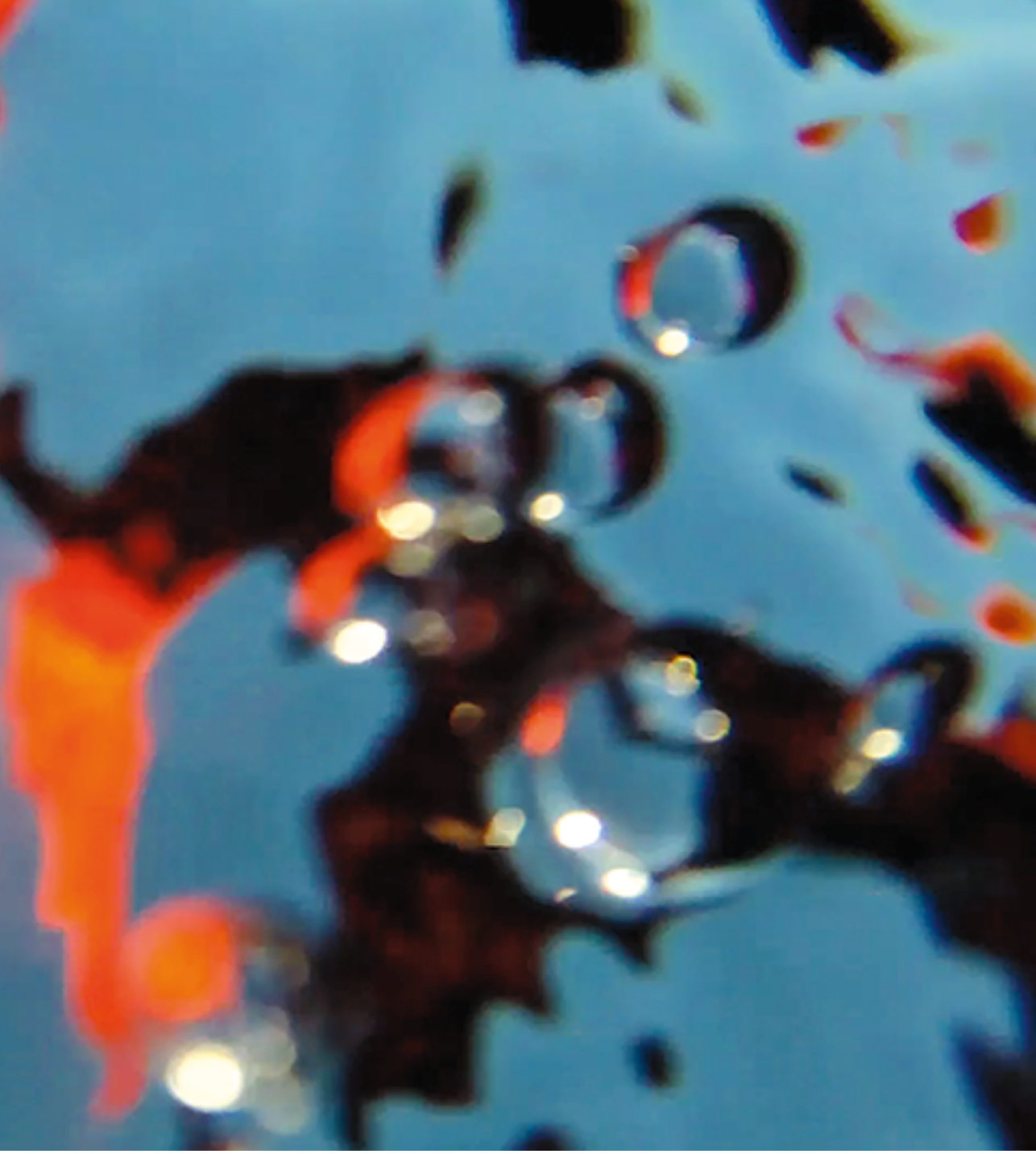
When editing images together, one can either reinstate the lost spatial and temporal connections, repairing the mediatic damage, or make brand new connections, creating fiction or falsehood. In either case, images assembled allow for visuality—"the making of the processes of history perceptible to authority"—as well as counter-visualities[18] and the ability to look back against authority. Visuality and counter-visuality situate power between the indexical parts of an image and the voids where interpretation happens. The practice of composing or recomposing images together attempts to transform these representational fragments, the image-sections, into either a cinematic experience, i.e. creating a narrative, or a model.

To sequence, to make a linear procession out of image-sections means to create a narrative. It means to create a thesis, putting forward a proposition of what took place and how we are to act on it. The insertion of an image within a temporal flow, and its alignment with other images and mediatic objects, gives it a cinematic life. Yet its ability to drift grant it both a pre- and post-cinematic effect. Pre-cinematic because images (whether stills or videos) operate as parts that make up the cinematic narrative, and post-cinematic because images do not have to follow the narrative linearly, they can rather have multiple lives by being associated to multiple other materials at once. To model, on the other hand, is to create non-linear associations where multiple scenarios can be simulated. The model is thus a more open and a less deterministic form. Yet, both narrative and model create visuality. Narrative and model, linear and non-linear forms of assembling image-sections become operative through the various practices that

surround them: the conversations, debates, and decisions taken on the basis of what they present and the actions that follow their interpretation.

In the case of Amel's shipwreck, the normative political narrative created from the distribution of images of this and other deadly incidents at the European borders can be summarised under the term "migration crisis." And so far it has resulted in the gradual closing of the borders, their militarisation, and the attack on civil society groups who offer support to those arriving at the shores. To counter this narrative, Amel responded with cinema: she, in collaboration with her partner Khaled Abdulwahed, and Pong Film, edited her footage in a seamless fashion, to create a film that offered a personal account of her journey and the thoughts that accompanied her while she struggled to stay alive, as well as a visceral visual depiction of the experience of surviving. In doing so, she resisted the hegemonic gaze that considers her as just another number in the daily quota of people arriving, surviving, or dying at the European shores. At the same time, and complementing her film, Forensic Architecture responded with a model, a spatial and temporal configuration of objects, actors, and events, that situated Amel's perspective in relation to other cameras and actors, and that located the incident within a long history of migration politics, demonstrating the failures of the EU border policies, as well as their structural disregard for human life. Through reading Amel's footage as sections, the film and the model began their operative lives.

Pp. 216–227
Amel Alzakout. Stills from footage from Alzakout's waterproof camera capturing the deadly shipwreck off the coast of Lesvos, Greece, on 28 October 2015. Alzakout is herself a survivor and an artist.



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1 Recently the situation in Lesvos and other Greek islands on the border has been much more hostile. Some locals have been exhausted with having to care single-handedly for people arriving without any government support; while right-wing groups have infiltrated these communities and openly harass those arriving on the islands, as well as their supporters.

2 Paul Lewis, Marc Tsurumaki and David J. Lewis, *Manual of Section* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2016).

3 Here I refer to images that have had some contact with the lifeworld, so to speak, rather than images created through drawing, painting, digital collage, etc. I am mainly concerned with images that have recorded a certain contact with the physical environment through a machinic process, images that are captured by lenses and processed through technology.

4 Rosi Braidotti, "A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities," *Theory, Culture & Society* 36 no. 6 (2019): 32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418771486.

5 Thomas Keenan and Hito Steyerl, "What Is a Document? An Exchange between Thomas Keenan and Hito Steyerl," *Documentary, Expanded – Aperture* 214, (Spring 2014): 58-64.

6 Braidotti, "A Theoretical Framework," 37.

7 A term introduced within the context of art history and visual culture by Gillian Rose in *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), 33-53.

8 "Eye / Machine III," Farocki-Film [website], accessed May 2, 2021, http://www.farocki-film.de/augem3eg.htm.

9 "Operational," Merriam-Webster Dictionary [website], accessed May 2, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/operational

10 "Operative," Merriam-Webster Dictionary [website], accessed May 2, 2021,https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/operative

11 Kathleen H. Pine and Max Liboiron, "The Politics of Measurement and Action," *Socio-Political Interactions, CHI 2015, Crossings*, Seoul: 3153, http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702298

12 *Purple Sea*, directed by Amel Alzakout, co-directed by Khaled Abdulwahed, montage by Philip Scheffner, produced by Pong film (2020), https://purplesea.pong-berlin.de/en/16/synopsis.

13 Richard Mosse. *Incoming*, Installation (2017), http://www.richardmosse.com/projects/incoming#.

14 Forensic Architecture, *Shipwreck At The Threshold Of Europe, Lesvos, Aegean Sea* (2020), https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/shipwreck-at-the-threshold-of-europe.

15 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, edited by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013), 8, ProQuest Ebook Central.

16 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 2.

17 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988).

18 Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Right to Look," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 475, *https:*//doi.org/10.1086/659354.