8 Recognizing the Unrecognized: The Photographs of Ahlam Shibli

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Ahlam Shibli's photographs present a seeming contradiction, which places aesthetics and politics at odds. Consider the following two images: one clearly legible, the other obscured and fragmentary. The first is from *Unrecognized* (2000), Shibli's photographic series that depicts fellow Palestinians of Bedouin descent who live in Israel's northern Galilee in the village Arab al-N'aim, which is officially unrecognized by the state of Israel. The image shows a man resting on some pillows in his corrugated tin house, surrounded by his meager possessions (fig. 8.1). Cabinets, a television, and some prints of the Dome of the Rock are visible behind several colored textiles and blankets that rest on the plastic-topped dirt floor, with a tea kettle and some food shown in the foreground. The image (and its series) would seem to advance a traditional documentary project, taking up its longstanding social commitment to expose the plight of the disenfranchised who are otherwise rendered invisible by mass media and ignored by political elites. Indeed this claim is often made on behalf of Shibli's project, which signals its political goal: to recognize the unrecognized in order to contest their disempowering invisibility. As the Palestinian writer Kamal Boullata observes: 'Shibli continues to make visible what has been made invisible in Israeli public space (2003, 58).'
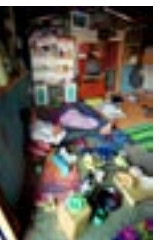

Fig. 8.1 (p. 182)

The second image is from *Goter* (2003), another of Shibli's series, this one focusing on the southern Palestinian Bedouin of the Naqab desert region (the Negev) (fig. 8.2). The black and white photograph captures a domestic scene set in the unrecognized village of al-Qurein (which is also the title of this particular image). All of the figures appear slightly blurred, owing to the shallow depth of field, with the middle one's face blocked by a piece of paper held up by the woman to her right. Adding to this sense of visual obstruction, the faces are shown clouded in darkness, so that it is difficult, if not impossible, to gather any sense of their expression, and beyond that, an entrance into the emotional setting of the scene. The austere, enigmatic photograph, disjointed and unwelcoming to the viewer, frustrates exposure in more ways than one, thus troubling the basis of documentary's logic.

It is the tension between these two images, which counterpose visibility and invisibility, the representation of politics and the politics of representation that runs right to the center of Shibli's project. But more than merely setting up an antagonism that nonetheless remains central to photographic practice today—the tension between aesthetics and politics, between photography's autonomy and its relation to life—Shibli mobilizes its complexities to overcome both the shortcomings of traditional social documentary *and* the limitations of the recent post-documentary repositioning of the photographic image as a fictional construct. Shibli thereby reinvents a model of photography that refuses to sever its ties to lived experience, even while she engages the representational complexities of her medium. If Shibli's

Fig. 8.2 Untitled (Goter no. 38), 2002-3, 38x56 cm, Gelatin silver print Courtesy the Artist ©Ahlam Shibli

photography indicates a rupture from traditional social documentary practice—precisely via her work's aesthetic complexity—then how does this development reconfigure her project's political engagement?

Part of the political strength of Shibli's work owes to the fact that she operates at a time when photography's status within the international art world has been gradually slipping toward artificial fabrication and away from the documentary mode. The dominant form of photography today, one could argue, is characterized by the 'picture'—the term of Canadian photographer Jeff Wall. Strategically opposed to the 'document'—traditionally denoting a form of proof which accurately conveys information—the 'picture' emphasizes the medium's basis in a subjective mode of depiction appreciated largely for its aesthetic qualities, where artistic autonomy has superceded photography's evidentiary or communicative function. Think of Wall's theatricalized tableaux, or Andreas Gursky's digitally modified images, or Thomas Demand's sculpturally mediated impressions of traumatic places, or Gregory Crewdson's cinematographic stagings. Both parallel to and extending the trend established by the 'pictures' generation of photographers of the late 1970s and 1980s, including Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, and Richard Prince, such work has traded photography's documentary function for its simulacral condition, evidencing a demotion of the medium's referential capacity. In the course of this development, the assumptions regarding photography's ability to record the reality of social relations has given way to practices concerned chiefly with the creation of artificial scenarios. More subtly, whereas photography was positioned a few decades ago to mediate between the *documentation* and the *representation* of social reality—as by Allan Sekula (1974; 1983), for instance—recent practitioners have progressed toward the extremes of representational fantasy and contrived fictional creations, often carried out through digital procedures that render the image fully available to manipulation. While this development may participate in a progressive move *away* from the false and naïve claims of truth and objectivity made on behalf of earlier documentary practices (such as the generation of Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus, and Robert Frank), the result appears to be the near complete disconnection of photography *from* social reality. Lived experience now appears merely as a secondary effect of the photograph's own creative fabrication. With that severing of photography from the real, however, there looms a potentially depoliticized eclipse of the medium's traditional social commitments, one that sits well, not surprisingly, with the formalist preferences of artistic institutions and the art market in general.

Consider the case of Jeff Wall, who argues that the medium's ascendant pictorial status owes in part to photography's withstanding conceptual art's anti-aesthetic assaults on its basis in 'depiction.' Because that attack—waged by artists such as Dan Graham, Ed Ruscha, and Bruce Nauman—'failed,' photography's fundamental relation to the picture was, according to Wall, established beyond all doubt, leaving it now to return unabashedly, as it does with Wall's own work, to its supposed key predecessors in 19th-century history painting. Yet one ramification of this repositioning of photography is that when the medium is evaluated according to the criterion of pictorial value, photographic achievement risks collapsing into a matter of fetishized, virtuosic technique and subjectivist aestheticism, which is precisely the vulnerability of Wall's elaborate digital constructions. Another is that the pictorial view of photography surrenders the medium's documentary functions: Wall's positing of a new 'near-documentary' image—even while representative of the progressive reinvention of photography following the theoretical problematization of the documentary mode's scientific presumptions of objectivity, neutrality, and truthfulness—can only create at best a simulated construction of reality akin to the artist's memory of the everyday or the painting of modern life (cf. Fried, 2007).

Yet because this solution ultimately fails to take on a direct relation to social reality, it has proven unsatisfactory for an emerging generation of photographers—Yto Barrada, Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, and Emily Jacir come to mind—who continue to explore documentary's continued relevance within photography or as part of a mixed-media artistic practice. Such work is often set in larger exhibition frameworks that have powerfully staged and theoretically examined this return to and reinvention of the documentary mode, such as *Documenta 11* (2002) and the 2006 Seville Biennial. For those like Ahlam Shibli, for whom the exposure of the lived conditions of the oppressed functions as a political imperative, the dedication to the documentary mode (not the *near*-documentary mode) remains unshaken, even while her photographic relation to her subjects is far from naïve or unmediated.

As documentary photography continues today, it nevertheless faces its own challenges, despite its practitioners' well-intentioned commitment to social justice and the exposure of the human costs of recent catastrophic social and political developments. Brazilian photojournalist Sebastião Salgado, for instance, has photographed the desperate and impoverished circumstances of migrants and refugees worldwide, from Tanzania to Brazil (Salgado, 2000). Yet his self-acknowledged compassionate identification with his subjects, rendered in highly dramatized scenes, courts what Tim Clark criticizes as the 'beautification of poverty,' which amounts to 'a photography of faces rather than one of causes (Clark, 2002; Mraz, 2002; Stallabras, 1997).' Meanwhile, other documentary practices, which avoid the fine art designation and consequently reject the stylistic signature that guarantees Salgado his worldwide recognition, tend to perpetuate photography's outdated epistemology of truth that conceptual practices have done so much to dismantle. Consider the photojournalists who have independently documented the recent catastrophes of war and occupation in the Middle East, such as Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, Kael Alford, Thorne Anderson, and Rita Leistner. On the one hand, their images are commonly positioned as performing 'the task of truly informing the public' with 'irrefutable images' that 'document honestly' what they witnessed in Iraq (Griffiths, 2005). Yet on the other, while resolutely 'unembedded' ideologically, these photographers' images still depend on the contextualizing captions of both mass media editorial slant and the independent books through which they are distributed. Their 'truthfulness' and significance, in other words, is determined by factors exterior to the photographic image.[1]

For artists like Ahlam Shibli, whose work, in my view, carefully avoids these assorted dangers, it becomes necessary to consider how to reinvent documentary photography so that it retains its referential function, but without the problematic side-effects of objectifying victimization or naturalizing its representations. Similarly pressing is the consideration of how Shibli might resist the obsolete epistemology of truth and objectivity without surrendering photography's relation to the real. Herein lies the challenge of engaging a necessarily complex understanding of photography, one that takes into account the historical condition of the medium's double tendency that positions it between aesthetics and documentation.

At first glance, it is the documentary side of Shibli's project that predominates. By focusing on the material conditions and social reality of the Bedouin's existence under Israeli rule, her photographs contest their invisibility. *Unrecognized*, for instance, includes an overview of Arab al-N'aim situated in its harsh rocky environment. A few dozen houses built of corrugated tin fragments sit in desolation among some trees. There are no paved roads in view, no signs of electricity lines or of other basic infrastructure. The village appears to exist in a primitive state— yet importantly it is shown to exist. In a photograph from the *Goter* series, the

interior of a house appears strangely absent of inhabitants, as if the unrecognized are somehow invisible to Shibli's camera.

In those images where figures do appear, they are captured in fleeting moments or flattened into silhouettes, which relays a sense of their precarious existential situation. Still other examples in the series nonetheless portray the people seemingly enjoying moments of happiness in their dire circumstances, such as one diptych that shows two children playing on some rocks, implying a scene of carefree everyday life that contrasts with the depressing environment represented by the metal shanty structure in the background. The children are positioned between a couple of adults, who serve as visual bookends that seal what appears to be a family unit, securing an image of survival that counters the otherwise abject status of non-recognition (figs. 8.3, 8.5a and 8.5b).

The Israeli government does not recognize these Bedouin villages because their residents have refused to move to the state's approved settlements, which are frequently located far from their places of work and familiar terrain. Because moving means surrendering their land to the Israeli state, these Palestinian Bedouin have remained in place but are forbidden to build permanent structures. They consequently have no access to running water, electricity, or sanitation, as several commentators have noted (Loock and Boullata, 2003; Berger and Kanaaneh, 2007). Nor do they have recourse to health services or education above the primary level. Subjected to frequent abuse and forced removals, their houses are sometimes bulldozed without advanced notice and their crops sprayed with herbicide by Israeli

Fig. 8.3 (p. 183)

Fig. 8.5a (p. 184)

Fig. 8.5b (p. 185)

Fig. 8.4. *Untitled (Goter no. 27)* 'Amra, 2002-3, 38x56 cm Gelatin silver *print*
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helicopters. In this regard, the unrecognized villages approximate what Giorgio Agamben has described as 'the camp,' designating 'a space that opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule' (it is not surprising to learn that Israel has maintained a state of emergency since its founding in 1948): 'Inasmuch as its inhabitants have been stripped of every political status and reduced completely to naked life,' Agamben writes, 'the camp is also the most absolute biopolitical space that has ever been realized—a space in which power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation (Agamben, 2000, 39, 41).' It is Israel's refusal to recognize these Palestinian Bedouin villages—erasing them from maps and road signs, hebraicizing their traditional Arabic names, rejecting legal claims to real estate ownership—that create the conditions of such a camp environment (even if they are not identical to other historical models of the camp). Therein the Palestinian Bedouin are politically disenfranchised, insofar as they have been denied all the rights extended to Israeli citizens (which these people are). For Shibli, this points to a harsh irony for a once-nomadic people, now forced 'to become refugees on their own land.'[2]

Shibli's focus on this Bedouin refugee population forms part of a growing trend in contemporary art. Indeed, artists have focused their gazes on refugees and migrants like never before. Whether as photography, video projection or installation (though documentary modes generally prevail), such art suggests a new paradigm of contemporary practice—one distinct from the photography of fiction and the photojournalism discussed above. It defines mobility as constricted, whether politically regulated, economically necessitated, or militarily prohibited, and shows travelers to be ever subjugated, stripped of rights, and exposed to unmitigated governmental power.[3] Modes of belonging too are seen as under threat, with social conditions rendered increasingly precarious by surveillance-obsessed states, policed borders, and refugee camps, as a sensationalist paranoia regarding strangers consigns an emerging class of people to the position of statelessness. This development is notable because it revises earlier models of mobility and belonging, particularly the nomadic trend of the 1990s. During that time, roving artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Gabriel Orozco made promiscuous use of materials, occupied ephemeral and changing sites, and internalized travel within their artistic structures, which frequently tapped into rather romantic conceptions of mobility bound up with the global explosion of international art exhibitions (Meyer, 2000). In this respect, the nomadic often coincided with a celebratory and trium-

phalist conception of globalization—now largely defunct—which emerged around 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the collapse of South African Apartheid in 1994, and pushed further with the jubilation surrounding the development of new communications technologies, including the Internet. Those events elicited visions of a new world of open borders, cyberdemocracy, and information superhighways, wherein freedom meant unlimited enterprise, and the predicted 'end of politics' signified the apotheosis of capitalism as New World Order (Flichy, 2007). The artist-nomad was a sign of the times.

That dream of globalization's triumph, however, has come to an end—most spectacularly with the attacks of 11 September, 2001, but also with the subsequent wars in the Middle East and the worldwide protests which variously manifested a massive refusal of recent economic, political, and military restructurings. The result has been a crisis of globalization, which has of late become synonymous with 'Empire,' signifying a new era of imperial State sovereignty—call it a post 9-11 age of 'military neoliberalism,' to use the San-Francisco-based collective Retort's phrase, or what David Harvey terms the 'new imperialism (Harvey 2005).' According to Retort's view, modernity figures as a catastrophic progression toward ever-greater means of political domination and economic inequality, carried out through spectacle and terror alike, which produces ever more refugees in its wake. With the coming warming of the environment owing to human-induced climate change, causing rising seas, heat waves and droughts, even greater demographic shifts lie ahead, perhaps more than what has been experienced ever before (Flannery, 2005; Pearce, 2006).

It is not surprising that contemporary art has taken up these pressing developments, and when it comes to refugees, has rejected those earlier idealizations of travel and romantic identifications with the nomadic. Similarly contemporary models have contested current celebrations of virtualized drift, which all too quickly forget that digital technology's mediascape is in fact unknown to multitudes.[4] Such idealizations must be placed in check by reflections on the growth of both state power and the powerlessness of the stateless, which is why Agamben's theory regarding the state of exception and bare life has become such an important reference point today, for it identifies a key structuring principle of contemporary experience.[5] Yet even as his conceptualization moves away from what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari termed 'deterritorialization,' with its by-now well-critiqued utopian

abstraction and potential continuity with capitalist flux, bare life poses problems of its own—namely, how to represent artistically life severed from representation politically? This question returns us to the consideration of how Shibli recognizes the unrecognized.

If the political force of Shibli's project resides in the exposure of the Palestinian Bedouin's dire situation, which aligns it with the ambition of committed documentary photography, then how does such a reading correlate with the highly unstable meanings of her images? This point is where the validity of claims made for the predominantly documentary aspect of Shibli's project breaks down. For instance, as Boullata argues: 'As a visual artist, [Shibli] aspired to go beyond being the passionate eyewitness she is, by attempting to give body to an injustice and the perpetuated impermanence of Palestinian life wherever it happens to persist (Boullata, 2003, 55).' Yet the precise relation of Shibli's photographs to injustice is in fact not so clear cut as this reading makes it seem. That Shibli's work is capable of producing multiple, even contradictory 'truths' is evident, for example, in the controversy that surrounded her exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum in 2003 (the exhibition formed part of Shibli's award for winning the 9th Nathan Gottesdiener Israeli Art Prize). In an essay written for the show's catalogue, curator Ulrich Loock boldly argued that Shibli's photographs open onto the history and politics of the oppression of the Palestinian Bedouin, including the 'Israeli occupation of the Negev,' where 'houses are demolished, where fields are poisoned and families are evicted from the living places on the basis of the Israeli land laws (Khinski, 2006, 406).' The text, deemed unacceptable by the museum's director, Mordechai Omer, because of its political and historical views of the post-1948 Israeli treatment of the Bedouin, was censored, which led to Loock's resignation. Omer, not surprisingly, wished to forward a very different interpretation of Shibli's work, one that assimilated the Bedouin's difficult circumstances shown in her images into an ultimately positive overarching narrative of Israeli national identity: 'The hardships [which] the Bedouin of the Negev have faced in the process of adapting to life-style changes,' wrote the director, 'is [sic] integral to the history and birth pangs of Israel (Khinski, 2006, 413).'

For Shibli, Omer's represented a colonizer's narrative, and it clearly contradicted her intentions: 'I told [the director] that his interpretation of my work was wrong and misleading,' she reports. 'My photographs are not about a process of "adaptation" to modern changes, but rather about state-imposed violent changes. I never

talked about "hardships," I talked about state repression (Khinski, 2006, 413).' No doubt, we would tend to agree with the artist's explanation over Omer's attempted cooptation, particularly when it comes to accounting for the motivations behind her own work. Nevertheless, what becomes evident in this case is the very instability of the meaning of her photographs, which bear an apparent openness to a diversity of readings. That Shibli's photography could be seen to support *both* perspectives not only places in doubt the presence of a singular incontrovertible 'truth' to her images, but also demonstrates that any prevailing interpretation ultimately depends on a selective historical contextualization of the images, as well as the institutional power both to impose that exclusive narrative and to censor other views. It is evident that the politics of Shibli's work cannot be pinned on the revelation of some immanent meaning residing in her photographs. Rather, what constitutes the political is the ability of Shibli's work, and its interpretive positioning by Loock, to interrupt the normative discourse that typically excludes the Palestinian Bedouin, despite the museum's attempted ideological assimilation and redirection of her project. In other words, Shibli's work can be seen to represent those who are normally erased from the aesthetico-political field of Israel's public sphere—even if the precise meaning of the photographs' relation to the political and historical circumstances of the Bedouin's 'repression' or 'hardship' cannot escape a certain contingency and interpretive multiplicity.

In this regard, the political operation of Shibli's photography corresponds to what French philosopher Jacques Rancière terms 'the politics of aesthetics (Rancière, 2004).' For Rancière, aestheticization does not equal deception, and neither does politics oppose aesthetics, as it does on both counts, for instance, in Walter Benjamin's classic account of photography, wherein the politicization of aesthetics was directed against the aestheticization of politics. Rather, aesthetics forms an essential feature of the political, which designates the process of 'redistributing the sensible,' in other words, reorganizing the perceptual field and interrupting politics' depoliticizing maintenance of the status quo. Political subjectivization occurs when those who are typically excluded from the public realm assume a voice in the struggle for equality—the ultimate goal of the political according to Rancière (2004)—which is exactly the struggle of Shibli's practice, even if it is not easily achieved. Rancière's argument is particularly useful here because it allows us to move beyond the familiar logic of documentary photography's traditional political justification—that it exposes the 'reality' behind aesthetic mystification,

Fig. 8.6 *Untitled (Goter no. 3)* 'Amra, 2002-3, 38x56 cm Gelatin silver *print*
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offering an honest truth that 'corrects' the disinformation of mass media.

Not only does political subjectivization occur through aesthetic mobilization, which accounts for the documentary aspect of Shibli's project, but it is also qualified by the precise nature of her photographs, marked as they are by frequent elisions, lacuna, and fragmentations, which complicates their representational structure. The *Goter* series, for instance, often presents figures in silhouette, half out of frame, or obscured by objects, so that the appearance of the Palestinian Bedouin suggests a process of emergence into incomplete visibility or even a passage into absence. Rarely do they appear uninterrupted or clearly legible. This representational feature of Shibli's imagery returns us to the problem with which we began: The visual obstruction present in Shibli's photographs troubles their documentary referentiality, which otherwise provides the very basis of recognition on which the political claims for her practice rely. We thus return to the tension found in Shibli's work as it situates itself between image and reference, and more broadly between aesthetics and politics (figs. 8.6 and 8.7).

There are several ways to read the presence of obstruction within Shibli's images. Following Boullata, we might understand the photographic fragmentations to play out an allegory of the disappearance of Palestinian communities, so that the voids and elisions *within* the image correspond to the political erasure of the Palestinian Bedouin *outside* the image. In this regard, Boullata's is a realist approach insofar as it views the photograph's formal structure as mirroring social reality.

Fig. 8.7 *Untitled (Goter no. 29)* 'Amra, 2002-3, 38x56 cm Gelatin silver *print* ©Ahlam Shibli

For example, returning to the domestic scene with which we began—the one with the figure's face obscured by a piece of paper—it appears that the photograph's representational disruption issues from the subject's political invisibility, as if the Bedouin's political non-recognition renders their documentation impossible. A second image provides the corollary: the photograph shows another domestic scene (this one from another village), which depicts a family sitting on a couch (fig. 8.8). Clearly legible, the figures appear fully available to the viewer's gaze. The transparency of the image owes ostensibly to the fact that the depicted man heads a community organization resisting eviction. As Boullata summarizes his response to these two photographs: 'In Shibli's language, the effacement of the women's features seems to reflect…their experience of being uncounted and unrecognized. In contrast, the close-up portraits of a Palestinian Bedouin activist and his family, clearly show the features of all three people in the picture. The visual recognition of human features thus appears to be equated with defiance and resistance (Boullata, 2003, 62).' In regard to the second photograph, Loock similarly states: 'In the face of the threat of demolition, this family seems to have made its house a home—which may have made it possible for Shibli to depict them as subjects where they live (Loock, 2003, 31).' In other words, political invisibility elicits photographic disruption, so that the conditions of the image are understood to 'reflect' exterior reality.

While tempting on one level—given the neatness of its correlation of reference and representation—the problem with this argument is that it effectively renders photography transparent to social-political reality, as if the image's legibility faithfully mirrors the subjective agency of the represented. In doing so, Boullata's argument ultimately overlooks the specificity of the photographic image by privileging reference over representation. This is especially striking because it is precisely the connection between the photographic signifier and its reference that is interrupted in so many of Shibli's images, interruptions that may become a screen for interpretive projection. Such projections, however, ultimately reveal the flaw of claiming that Shibli's project is fundamentally a documentary one—if only Boullata reversed his terms, arguing instead that the images were *constructions* of Shibli's complex representational negotiation of the Palestinian Bedouin's problematic relation to visibility and invisibility, rather than a transparent reflection of it.

Rather than suggesting that Shibli's photographic elisions reveal the truth of her subjects, is not the more radical approach to argue that her fragmented images expose the truth of photography? In other words, the emphasis here would be placed on photographic representation, rather than on the referent, so that the visual fragmentations within the image identify first and foremost photography's unstable sign structure. The marred images of Shibli, in my view, debunk the assumptions of photography's clarity of meaning and instead point to the fact that photography's indexical relationship to its referent is radically indetermi-

Fig. 8.8 *Untitled (Goter no. 42)* 'Umm Mitnan, 2002-3, 38x56 cm Gelatin silver print ©Ahlam Shibli

nate: '[T]he photograph is pure contingency and can be nothing else,' as Roland Barthes argued long ago (1981,28).[6] Shibli's tacit acknowledgment of this premise, as demonstrated by her repeated inclusion of absences and disruptions within her photography, provides an explanation for the antinomy that is at the crux of her practice—to *represent* the unrecognized, but also to *deny* them representation. By revealing the obstructions of the image, Shibli reveals the representational condition of photography—that it produces the effects it displays, plays an active role in the construction of its subjects, and constitutes an opaque surface whose coding can only be ambiguous—which interrupts interpretations based on referential certainty.

This acknowledgment adds nuance to Rancière's terms by identifying Shibli's 'aesthetics of politics,' which operates in two ways. First, her photographs' fragmented representational condition indicates Shibli's rejection of the supposed 'truthfulness' of the propaganda of the state, which in reality carries out forms of social and political exclusion. Only by accepting the fundamental uncertainty of photographic meaning can one then challenge the representational condition of the dominant regime's hierarchical structure of social relations. One consequence of this deconstruction of the ideology of realism, however, is that one cannot then prop up a more agreeable regime of truth in its place. Shibli's refusal to do so identifies the second operation of her 'aesthetics of politics:' by acknowledging photography's own limits of recognition—its basis in contingency—Shibli avoids creating her own state of essential truths and substantial identities in the course of her exposure of those excluded from the existing social-political order. While her photographs do bring visibility to the Palestinian Bedouin, her images simultaneously acknowledge an indeterminate relation to meaning. Shibli's photographic contingency, moreover, is not only inscribed into the image—through its many elisions and lacuna—but also corresponds to the diversity of Shibli's photographic styles, which include family snapshots in color, neutral photojournalistic shots, and black and white artistic representations. The effect of her mobilization of a multiplicity of such approaches is to show her subjects in a diversity of ways, emphasizing social differences, spontaneity, and complexity, which resists substantializing her subjects as complete identities that could be comprehensively documented in solitary images.

Shibli's 'recognizing the unrecognized,' then, means the acknowledgement first and foremost of the gaps and fissures *within* the image, which entails the resistance

to the full inscription of her subjects—not because her photography 'reflects' the undoubtedly real process of social erasure taking place in Israel, but rather because the life of the Palestinian Bedouin cannot be fully captured by photography.[7] It is the critical achievement of her photography to suggest that there is something beyond the photographic image, something that escapes representation. Were Shibli's images interpreted as offering a complete account of her subjects, then the danger would be a photographic objectification that might reify the Palestinian Bedouin's social oppression at the level of representation, constituting a second-order victimization, or what Abigail Solomon-Godeau terms a 'double act of subjugation:' 'first, in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then re-presents (Solomon-Godeau, 1991, 176).' Ultimately, Shibli's refusal to do so resonates with the political position of Rancière, for whom political struggle never presupposes a predefined group of individuals, such as the proletariat, the poor, or minorities; for if it did then a contingent social and political grouping would be transformed into an ontological essence, thereby naturalizing the group's disempowered status. Conversely, for Rancière, the political can only be relational and relative in nature, founded upon an ongoing, never-ending political subjectivization that contests hegemony rather than founding new regimes. It is this process of political becoming that Shibli's photographs extend to her subjects. The indeterminacy of her photographs thus joins their social and representational aspects. As Loock suggests: '[I]n a situation wherein people are denied the fundamental rights that would empower them to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects, it seems that in order not to constitute them as victims of their adverse living conditions, they must be denied the right to their own photograph (Loock, 2003, 31).' Yet Shibli, in my view, neither denies her Palestinian Bedouin subjects this right, nor simply mirrors their disappearance at the hands of the state; rather, because her photography acknowledges its own representational limitations, it both avoids reifying victimization and opens up the possibility for political subjectivization from within the image.

This opening up of possibility, finally, must be seen as a double act of emancipation: first in the social world, where Shibli's photographs constitute an interruption of the hierarchical organization of social-political space by recognizing the unrecognized Palestinian Bedouin (which demonstrated its effects when her work was shown at the Tel Aviv Museum); and second, in the regime of the image,

where her photographs' fragmented condition repudiates the objectification of the Palestinian Bedouin as victims by recognizing the limits of photography's capture. Her work consequently indicates that her subjects' existence extends beyond both their documentary representation and their oppressive relegation to the status of bare life.[8] As such, Shibli's is a new kind of photography. Its sense of heterogeneity seems to follow necessarily from the visual and conceptual complexities of renegotiating photography's relation to aesthetics and politics. Such tensions also indicate a sensitivity to the formidable forces of negation directed at the Palestinian Bedouin by the powerful Israeli state and its media system, which normally control the representation of the Palestinian Bedouin. The fragility of Shibli's photographs implies a recognition of the precarious power of its own protest.

Notes

[1] Another route for independent distribution is via the internet, and indeed there have been a number of interesting cases where artists have exploited such technologies for photographic and video-based projects. But here the disadvantage is that of the immateriality and ephemerality of images, limiting the effectiveness of representation. Digitization is also unacceptable for artists who are committed to the materiality of the photographic print (Wilson-Goldie, 2007).

[2] Ahlam Shibli, 'Arab al-N'aim,' posted online at: <http://homepage.hispeed.ch/ahlamshibli/texts/arab.htm>. I follow Agamben in his use of the term refugee, which sees its condition as continuous with the so-called 'internally displaced person,' terms that may be legally differentiated by NGOs and the UN.

[3] Among the examples I have in mind are: Ursula Biemann's video-essays and Multiplicity's installations that variously examine Mediterranean and North African migration; Zarina Bhimji's photographs that retrace the displaced artist's return to Uganda; the Otolith Group's essay-films of cultural and temporal dislocation; Zineb Sedira's videos of linguistic-cultural postcolonial displacement; and Mike Rakowitz's homeless Parasite shelters. Also consider recent exhibitions including the 2002 *Documenta 11*'s dedication to 'aterritoriality,' the recent 2006 Seville Biennial's theme of the 'Unhomely,' *Migration,* exh. cat. (Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, 2003); *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond*, ed. Anselm Franke, exh. cat. (Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2006; Biemann's *Maghreb Connection* at Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, 2006; and *Port City: On Mobility and Exchange,* exh. cat. (Bristol: Arnolfini Gallery, 2007).

[4] See David Joselit, 'Navigating the New Territory: Art, Avatars, and the Contemporary Mediascape,' *Artforum* (Summer 2005), 276: 'These are the symptoms of a new spatial order: a space in which the virtual and the physical are absolutely coextensive, allowing a person to travel in one direction through sound or image while proceeding elsewhere physically.'

[5] Witness the recent *Documenta 12*'s international magazine project, dedicated to the question 'What is Bare Life?,' the results of which are available online at: http://magazines.documenta.de (consulted October 2007).

[6] For Sekula too, the meaning of photography is 'indeterminate,' as he explains in 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary: (Notes on the Politics of Representation),' 1976, in *Allan Sekula, Dismal Science: Photo Works, 1972-1996* (Normal: University Galleries, Illinois State University, 1999), 121.

[7] As Jean-François Chevrier writes, 'The relationship with power of a poetry of resistance can be effective only if it is founded on an experience of subjectivation that overflows readymade critical attitudes.' It thereby becomes an act of 'internal decolonization:' 'A Document of Experience,' in *Trackers* (2007), 20-21.

[8] For more discussion of the complex artistic relation to bare life, see my 'Life Full of Holes,' *Grey Room*, 24 (Fall 2006): 72-88.

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Fig. 0.1 Marcel Broodthaers, *Carte du monde poétique*, 1968 Pape on canvas. Signed and dated, below on the right, 116 x 181 cm, Colección Annick y Anton Herbert © Marcel Broodthaers, VEGAP, 2005

Fig 1.4 Can Altay, *'We're Paperman' he said,* 2003. [Installation view by Peter Cox from the exhibition *EindhovenIstanbul* (Van Abbemuseum 2005) curated by Charles Esche and Eva Meyer-Hermann]. Reproduced with permission from the artist

Fig. 1.5 Can Altay, *'We're Paperman' he said*, 2003. [Installation view by Peter Cox from the exhibition *EindhovenIstanbul* (Van Abbemuseum 2005) curated by Charles Esche and Eva Meyer-Hermann] Reproduced with permission from the artist

Fig. 1.6 Can Altay, *'We're Paperman' he said*, 2003 [Photograph by Peter Cox] Reproduced with permission from the artist

Fig. 1.7 Can Altay, *'We're Paperman' he said*, 2003 [Photograph by Peter Cox] Reproduced with permission from the artist

Fig. 1.8 Els Opsomer, _lmovie [one]_: The agony of silence, film still, 2003. Courtesy galerie erna hécey. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

Fig. 1.9 Els Opsomer, _lmovie [one]_: The agony of silence, film still, 2003. Courtesy galerie erna hécey. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

Fig. 2.2 Peter Kennedy, *Chorus: The Presence of the Past* from *Chorus from the Breath of Wings* (1993). Marching drums, 2 black and white television sets (both modified), with video tape looped programs of Joseph Stalin's hand as angel's wings and marching German army with 2 loudspeakers and tape recorded sounds intermittently amplified. Overall 1.60 x .80 x 3.60 metres. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

Fig. 2.3 Peter Kennedy, *A Language of the Dead from Requiem for Ghosts* (1997-98). Blue neon light mounted on freestanding timber panel. 3120 x 300 mm. Courtesy the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. Photo: Kenneth Pleban.

Fig. 2.5 Peter Kennedy, *One Long Catastrophe* (2000–2002). Pigment inkjet prints, neon, MDF. Digital compositing by Les Walkling. Overall 212 x 707.5 cm approx. Photographs courtesy Associated Press and English Heritage – National Monuments Record. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
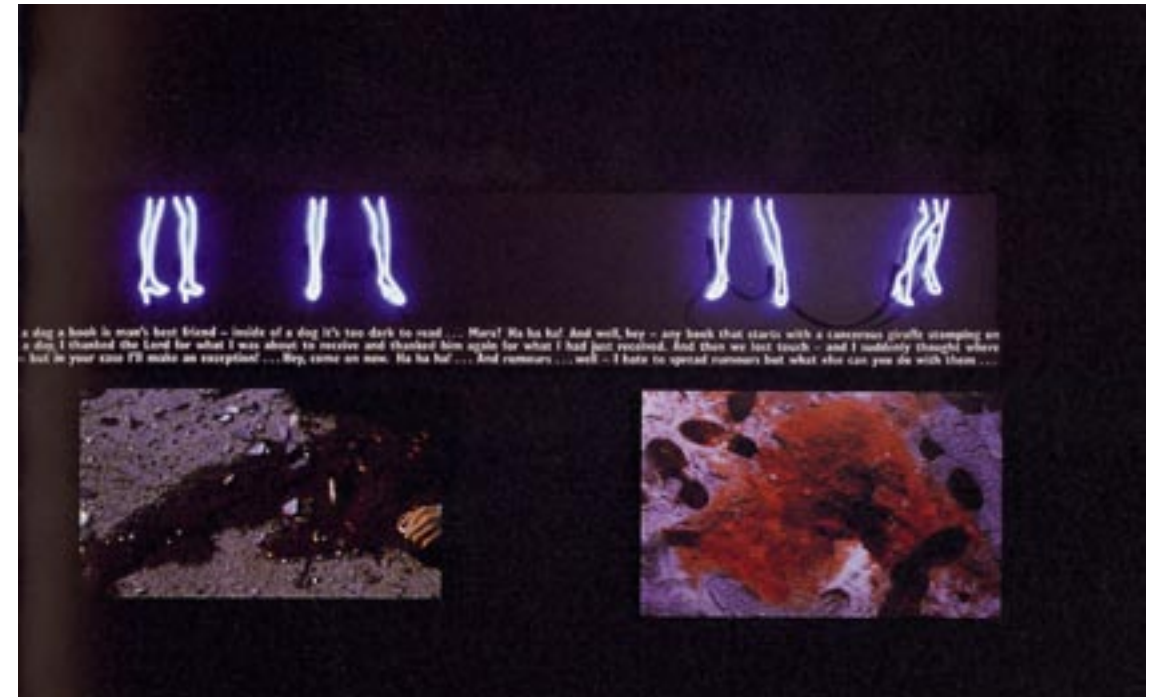
Fig. 2.8 Peter Kennedy, *At the End of the Twentieth Century – Comedy and Tragedy Step Out* (2000-2002). Pigment inkjet prints, neon, MDF. Digital compositing by Les Walkling. Overall 530 x 636 cm approx. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

Fig. 2.9 Peter Kennedy, *NOWANDTHEN* Thursday 27 February, 1997 (1997-98). Neon, digital prints, MDF, acrylic. Photo collaboration with Danielle Thompson. Overall 77 x 915 x 21.5 cm approx. Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Collection, Hobart, Australia.

Fig. 3.2 John Baldessari, *Blasted Allegories (Colorful 'Rebus'): … Across Beeline*, 1978. ©John Baldessari, 2007
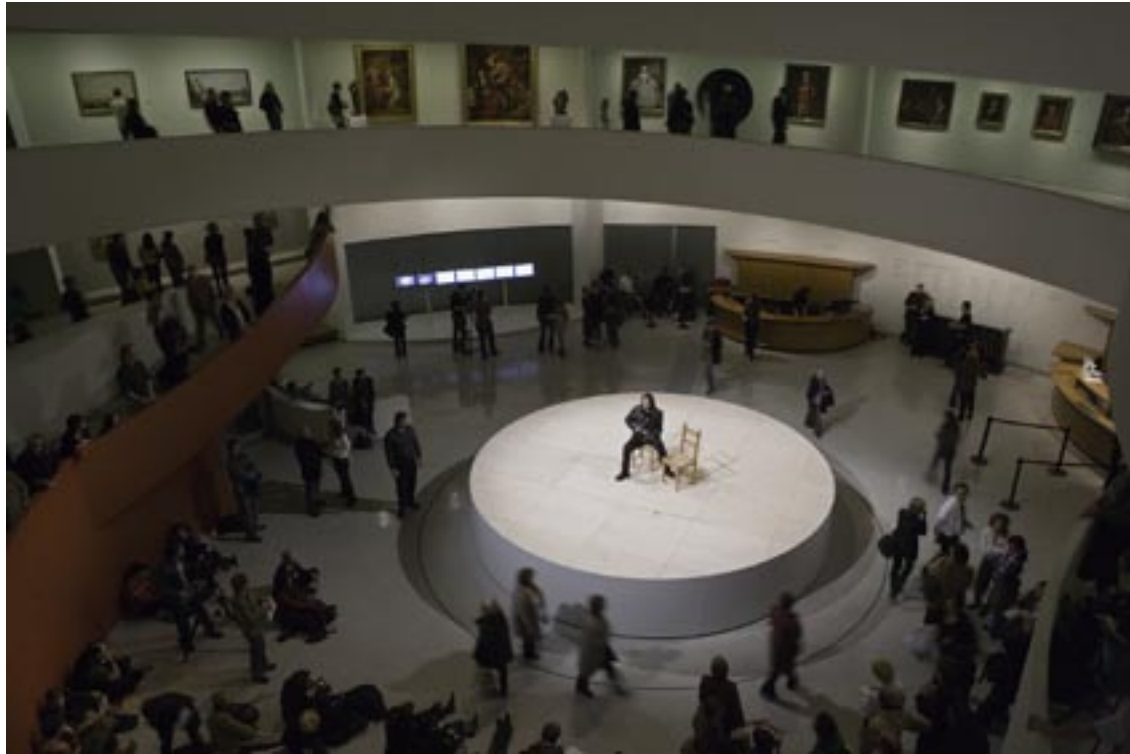
Fig. 4.3 Marina Abramovic: *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, 2005. Photo: ?

Fig. 4.4 Marina Abramovic: *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, 2005. Photo: ?

Fig. 5.1 Page spread from the exhibition catalogue *Jeff Wall: Installation of Faking Death* (1977), *The Destroyed Room* (1978), *Young Workers* (1978), *Picture for Women* (1979), Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1979

Fig. 5.2 Jeff Wall, *The Flooded Grave*, 1998-2000. Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 5.10 Jeff Wall, *Shop Window Rome*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 6.1 Thomas Demand, *Room,* 1994. Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 6.2 Thomas Demand, *Office,* 1994. Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 6.3 Thomas Demand, *Bathroom,* 1994. Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 6.3 Thomas Demand, *Corridor,* 1994. Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 6.4 Thomas Demand, *Poll,* 1994. Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 7.3 Rabin Square, photograph by the author

Fig. 8.1 Ahlam Shibli, *Awakening Unrecognised*, 2000 'Arab al-Na'im, 90x60 cm, Digital print, Courtesy the Artist ©Ahlam Shibli

Fig. 8.3 Ahlam Shibli, *'Arab al-Na'im Unrecognised,* 2000, 'Arab al-Na'im, 60x90 cm, Digital print, Courtesy the Artist ©Ahlam Shibli

Fig. 8.5a Ahlam Shibli, *Fatoma Unrecognised,* 2000, 'Arab al-Na'im, 60x90 cm, Digital print, Courtesy the Artist ©Ahlam Shibli

Fig. 8.5b Ahlam Shibli, *Abu'Ali Unrecognised,* 2000, 'Arab al-Na'im, 60x90 cm, Digital print, Courtesy the Artist ©Ahlam Shibli

Fig. 9.1 Installation of *Best of Vik Muniz* show at Galerie Xippas, Pacy-sur-Eure, 2005. Courtesy Galerie Xippas © Galerie Xippas, the artist

Fig. 9.2 Vic Muniz, *Bacchus astride a barrel, after Rubens (Pictures of Junk)*, 2005. C-Print, Edition of 6 + 4 AP, 213,5 x 183 cm, Courtesy Galerie Xippas © Galerie Xippas, the artist

Fig. 9.4 Vincent Debanne, # HT_5227_PA, *Dreamworks* series, 2006. Courtesy the IPRN © The IPRN, the artist

Fig. 9.3 Tomoko Yoneda, *Hill II-View of Serbian front-line during the Siege of Sarajevo*, 2004. Courtesy the artist © the artist

Fig. 9.5 Permanent display of the photography collection, MoMA, New York, 2002. © Alexandra Moschovi.

Fig. 9.6 Yiorgis Yerolymbos, *Tate Modern opening*, 2000. Courtesy the artist © the artist

Fig. 9.7 Yiorgis Yerolymbos, Looking at *Moving Pictures*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2002