

Assembly of the Absent

Since the mid-nineties, Ahlam Shibli’s photographs have depicted the conditions of living under oppression. The documentary aesthetics forged in territories occupied by Israel to address the traumas implicit in the discrimination, expulsion, and violent death of the Palestinian population has been transposed to other places where the idea of home is just as problematic. Like the celebrations to commemorate French war victims and the contradictions involved in the revelation that the same people can be victims of horrifying violence and then agents of an equally unjust colonial regime, or the desperate decision of individuals who are obliged to emigrate to reconcile their bodies with the desire for a gender of their own choice. The work of Ahlam Shibli uncovers states of dislocation and occupation that are not limited to the Palestinian condition, but extend to other states and situations that harbor injustice and paradox.

Phantom Home brings together the major series of photographs produced so far by Ahlam Shibli. The generosity of the artist and the efforts of three institutions (the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, the Jeu de Paume in Paris, and the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves in Porto) have enabled the co-production of the exhibition and the publication that accompanies it.

Death, the photographer’s most recent series, is the product of a collaborative project to present one of this artist’s most emblematic works. The sixty-eight color images accompanied by often exhaustive legends occupy the main body of this publication. Photographs, posters, graves, and graffiti summon up Palestinian fighters who died during armed resistance to Israeli occupation, or in various different circumstances (*Shaheed, Shaheeda*), martyrdom operators (*Istishhadi, Istishhadiya*), and prisoners who, in general, are considered failed martyrs. Together, they constitute an assembly of the absent.

Once again, with this series Ahlam Shibli takes documentary praxis to the limits of the visible. The martyr brings into play an aesthetics and a politics of disappearance that aims, as Esmail Nashif writes in his essay, to regain control of the Palestinian death. According to Nashif, the Palestinians, after being exposed to various forms of violence, have had the authority over their own death commandeered. In this case, photography is faced with an unusual task: showing collective annihilation. It is not the death of a body that it is required to show, but the destruction of everything that could uphold and prove the existence of a civil society. As is usual in the way she works, Ahlam Shibli approached this kind of material reality by engaging in conversation with friends and families of the martyrs. In the course of these encounters, other photographs appeared, reminding us of the impossibility of gaining direct access to past events. A vast visual production in remembrance of the martyrs takes center stage in *Death*. Coexistence with these images, some of them worn by exposure to the elements, others venerated in the homes of close relatives, suggests that the Palestinian public domain has given way to the absent.

In his essay, T.J. Demos asks what has happened to critical distance toward an environment that celebrates death by creating a space saturated with images of martyrs. What is certain is that Ahlam Shibli’s photographs represent an immersion from which it is difficult to break free. At the same time, however, they do not

subscribe to any of the most common interpretative models in the colonization, either in *Death* or in other works. Rather than taking the causality of the events represented as its basis, the narrative of her series lies in the dynamic of representation. The apparent lack of critical stance is drowned out by the devotional attitude called for by the representations of the martyrs. These are photographs that disable the characteristic mobilization of the humanistic register and save the victims from further victimization, this time by photography itself. Ahlam Shibli uses a concept of photography in which the medium refuses to accept indiscriminately all the objects and subjects that pass before it.

The documentary practice of Ahlam Shibli negates the premise underlying a strain of photography that has set itself up as an essential ingredient of global public opinion and provides every event for debate with an image. So many things happen in this hyper-visual regime, which allow us to see and to know everything without guaranteeing the occasion to act on it; precisely what the artist Hito Steyerl has called “idle reflexivity”—information with no right to action or possibility of intervention. The photography of Ahlam Shibli calls for textuality to suspend the autonomy of the image and to introduce it into a regime that no longer uses photography for information purposes. The reflexivity of Shibli’s images lies in the relationship with the subject that speaks to us while remaining suspended within the photograph itself. Furthermore, a single image cannot be detached from the series to which it belongs, as each of her photographs finds its meaning in that of a sequence. Therein lies a rich, complex multitude of signs that represents the only vestige of community in situations of precarious life.

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Ahlam Shibli

Phantom Home

Essays by
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