Disappearance and Precarity: On the Photography of Ahlam Shibli

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In one photograph from Ahlam Shibli's recent series *Death* (2011–12), a grandmother and three of her grandchildren appear in a sitting room. Amid the decorative golden curtains, beige sofa, and wooden coffee table, set with a pot of tea and an arrangement of flowers, an enormous painting looms over them in the corner depicting a young man holding a machine gun. He wears a black leather jacket with upturned collar and gazes out at the viewer with a look of defiance. At the top of the canvas, an Arabic inscription reads: "The panther of Kata'ib Shuhada' al-Aqsa, Mikere" (Mikere, of al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades). The young boy on the couch peers up at the portrait of his now-dead father, his admiring gaze alerting us to the social function of such imagery beyond the death of its sitter, exemplifying a repeated comment during the height of the Second Intifada: "For every activist killed, ten more would become involved as a result."[1] Though dead, the absent Mikere remains a presence in life, transmitting a message perhaps more surely that he ever could have while living.

Death explores the visual culture of Palestinian martyrdom found in public and private spaces. It shows the posters found on walls all over the territories occupied in 1967, in which martyrs (mostly men, but also some women and children) are positioned in front of Palestinian national symbols like the Dome of the Rock, alongside verses from the Quran, or the messages of a militant group. Photographs of the deceased are also carried in the hands of mourners, placed on necklaces, displayed on mobile phones and in family living rooms. For anthropologists of such commemorative practices, "the everyday emphasis on the celebration of martyrdom might be understood as a collective self-defense against the absurdity of everyday devastation, backed by every possible mythical, religious and historical value in order to make this daily dose of death not only meaningful but absolutely inevitable."[2] As such, the mythification of martyrs exemplifies how "resistance and sacrifice have been equated as an inevitable price to pay for a present sense of life alienated and lived in the promise of a better future."[3]

Yet while these omnipresent images of death in Palestinian communities testify to the disappearance of sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, they exemplify, at the same time, the refusal of that disappearance. What remains is the ghostly presence of those now dead, who ceased living for multiple reasons, but whose uncanny appearance is now made to serve various political and religious causes in support of the Palestinian struggle for decolonization and independence. Still, the images document a phenomenon that is by no means simple in cultural or representational terms. What of the controversial meaning of martyrdom, for instance, for the families who may have lost their houses to Israeli bulldozers owing to the actions of their relatives? What about those who question the legitimacy and effect of such martyrdom operations? How do the living feel about the militarization of Palestinian society as a result of the armed resistance against the colonizer? What of the "polyvalent politics"—in the words of Lori A. Allen—of such commemorative practices in which those who died as innocent bystanders (especially children) are instrumentalized by competing militias?[4] Regarding the answers to these questions, the photographs are silent. Yet they do open up these very considerations, searching without easy conclusion, creating a certain awareness of, and relation to, non-knowledge. Confronting the photographic truth of such non-knowledge is one consistent aspect of Shibli's work.

Her recent series of martyr images thus builds on her long-standing photographic project dedicated to recording the life (and afterlife) of those living on the boundaries of exclusion, threatened with disappearance, as well as documenting the commemoration of those who have succumbed to absence. Yet the end, as we have seen, is never really the end, at least in the regime of the image. Just as those figures in *Death* represent a refusal of forgetting and a sacrifice for a better life for those who have survived them, an act made in the defiance of disappearance, so too is Shibli's photographic practice pledged to recognize the unrecognized, challenging the visual regimes that would otherwise consign those subjects to erasure.

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1. Lori A. Allen, "The Polyvalent Politics of Martyr Commemorations in the Palestinian *Intifada,*" in *History & Memory* 18.2 (Fall / Winter 2006), p. 119.
2. Mahmoud Abu Hashhash, "On the Visual Representation of Martyrdom in Palestine," in *Third Text* 20, no. 3 / 4 (May–July 2006), p. 400.
3. Abu Hashhash 2006 (see note 2), p. 391.
4. Allen 2006 (see note 1).

Shibli's photography practice began with the recording of the living contexts of Palestinians of Bedouin descent, presenting images of life under the threat of dispossession, and survival within the conditions of enforced displacement, prolonged states of impermanence, and homelessness. They include the series *Unrecognised* (2000), devoted to showing the circumstances of people living in the Galilee in a Palestinian village that appears on no official Israeli map; *Goter* (2002–03), a series that depicts the social and material conditions of Bedouin Palestinians of the Naqab (Negev); *Arab al-Sbaih* (2007), portraying Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan; and *The Valley* (2007–08), representing the village Arab al-Shibli in Lower Galilee (originally named Arab al-Sbaih). In recent years, however, Shibli's engagement has expanded into other geopolitical and social contexts beyond the Palestinian ones, with further photographic cycles. For instance, the series *Eastern LGBT* (2004 / 06) portrays gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people living in Zurich, Barcelona, Tel Aviv, and London, who escaped countries like Pakistan, Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey, and Somalia that are intolerant of unconventional sexual orientations. *Dom Dziecka. The house starves when you are away* (2008), shows the inhabitants of several orphanages in Poland where children have movingly established a home for themselves, creating their own family-like relationships, groupings that at the same time differ from conventional social orders and thus indicate possibilities for belonging beyond the traditional family unit. Finally, *Trauma* (2008–09) presents a cycle of pictures including images of former fighters of the French resistance from the south central region of Corrèze. Some of these subjects who suffered under Nazi persecution went on to participate in colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria a few years later, fighting against people who, like their former selves, were fighting for independence.[5]

These diverse photographic series are linked by Shibli's long-standing commitment to investigating the experiences of social exclusion, as found in the spaces of political non-recognition and dispossession, as well as the expatriate spaces of rejection and non-belonging. As such, her work resonates with like-minded approaches to documentary photography situated in zones of conflict, such as the work of David Goldblatt, Guy Tillim, and Santu Mofokeng, who photographed life in and after South African apartheid. Yet what marks Shibli's practice is its consistent investigation of geopolitical and cultural homelessness wherein inhabitants strive to construct places of belonging. Indeed, as Ulrich Loock writes, "all of Ahlam Shibli's work is guided by a fundamental question, 'what does it mean to be at home?' And its inversion, 'what does it mean not to be at home?'"[6] In Shibli's photo works, this dialectic of being-at-home and homelessness extends in many directions—to national exclusion, colonial dispossession, socio-sexual alienation, familial deprivation, and death. Yet this structural relationality between inclusion and exclusion is also complicated in her work, insofar as the connection between victim and perpetrator, citizen and alien, living and dead, is never secure—at least not in the field of representation. Neither is the act of recognition an uncomplicated gesture or simple political maneuver. For Shibli's practice remains attentive to the competing ideologies of appearance—as with the *Death* series in particular—and questions what it means when recognition is made, showing that recognition never comes without motivations and unstable political effects. As such, her project's ostensible commitment to recognizing the unrecognized—bringing visibility to those whom the hegemonic powers have cast to the margins—is ultimately complicated by her photography's sensitivity to documentary's aesthetics of indeterminacy. As numerous theorists have observed, photographic meaning is nothing but contingent (dependent on context, captions, sites of reception, and modes of institutional interpretation), which means that its significance is at best uncertain.[7] This complexity—positioned between

5. Shibli points out the following historical dates: the war in Indochina started in 1946; on May 8, 1945, the same day that Nazi Germany surrendered in World War II, the French fired at local protesters demonstrating against colonial rule in Sétif, which led to the events known as the Sétif and Guelma massacres in Algeria; the war between France and Algerian independence movements lasted from 1954 to 1962. (E-mail correspondence with the author, October 18, 2012.)
6. Ulrich Loock, "Ahlam Shibli's Critique of the Notion of Home," in *Cura Magazine* 2 (2009).
7. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1993), p. 28: "[T]he photograph is pure contingency and can be nothing else." For Allan Sekula, the meaning of photography is "indeterminate," as he argues in "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," in *Allan Sekula, Dismal Science: Photo Works, 1972-1996* (Normal, 1999), p. 121. More recently, Hito Steyerl has focused on "uncertainty" as the basis of the documentary mode; see "Documentary Uncertainty," in *A Prior* 15 (2007).

Self Portrait
Palestine, 2000
Series of 18 photographs
21.2 × 30 cm; 30 × 21.2 cm
Chromogenic prints

A journey of returning to the places that showed me who I am.

indeterminacy and political recognition—places her work at the forefront of the contemporary reinvention of documentary practice and the exploration of the possibilities of socially engaged photography.

Consider Shibli's *Unrecognised,* a series that focuses on Palestinian Bedouin who have refused to move to officially approved areas, in order not to lose their lands, and, staying defiantly in place, are officially "unrecognized" by the Israeli state. They are consequently condemned to live in temporary structures with no access to running water, electricity, or sanitation.[8] The photographs depict their corrugated tin buildings held together by rusting chains and locks, located in a harsh, rocky landscape. Barefoot children appear playing in the inhospitable environment, while women engage in domestic labor, hanging clothes to dry on lines outside. Denied health services and education above the primary level, the unrecognized Palestinians suffer frequent abuse from state authorities, including forced removals. Their houses are sometimes bulldozed (with and without advanced notice) and their crops sprayed with herbicide by Israeli helicopters. Relegated to the position of squatters on their traditional lands, they have been denied many rights extended to Israeli citizens (which the Palestinian Bedouin depicted in *Unrecognised* are). For Shibli, this points to a harsh irony for a once-nomadic people, now forced "to become refugees on their own land."[9] Despite this oppressive context, Shibli includes images of family bonds and playful children, colorfully painted houses, and carefully attended gardens, images that testify to a will to survive and to create a sense of home against the reality of legal homelessness.

It is the same political context of Israel's refusal to recognize Palestinian Bedouin villages—erasing them from maps and road signs, Hebraizing their traditional Arabic names, rejecting legal claims to real estate ownership—that Shibli confronted with her subsequent series *Goter.* The title derives from local lore recalling the British Mandate era, when Palestinians frequently heard the military order, "go there." The phrase transformed over generations into today's linguistic relic carrying a barely decipherable echo of that earlier confrontation with colonial power.[10] That directive to "go there" was soon reiterated during Israel's consolidation of its state during the early nineteen-sixties, when Israeli military leader and politician Moshe Dayan explained the policy to assimilate the erstwhile itinerant Bedouin into Israeli society by introducing them into the urban workforce in industry, services, construction, and agriculture. "This would be a revolution, but it may be fixed within two generations," he explained. "Without coercion but with government direction . . . this phenomenon of the Bedouins will disappear."[11]

Dayan's "revolution" amounted to a state-sponsored schedule for the disappearance of a people. It left the Palestinian Bedouin with two alternatives: either remain in "unrecognized" and thus impermanent settlements, which effectively became camp environments that designated a state of exception where subjects would be stripped of their political rights and reduced to a precarious existence,[12] or assimilate into Israeli society and accept the disappearance of "this phenomenon of the Bedouins." Both courses would in fact be continuous with what the late Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling terms "politicide"—"the physical destruction of public institutions and infrastructure, land colonization, starvation, social and political isolation" that targets a specific people.[13] In this regard the treatment of the

8. See Kamal Boullata, "Cassandra and the Photography of the Invisible," in *Ahlam Shibli: Lost Time* (Birmingham, 2003); and Ulrich Loock, "*Goter,* Representation of the Unrecognized," in *Ahlam Shibli: Go there, Eat the mountain, Write the past* (Amman, 2011).
9. See Ahlam Shibli's description of *Unrecognised,* posted online at www.ahlamshibli.com/texts/arab.htm (accessed October 26, 2012).
10. See Ahlam Shibli's website and her statement regarding *Goter* at www.ahlamshibli.com/statement/Goter.htm (accessed October 26, 2012).
11. Moshe Dayan, 1963, quoted in Shibli (see note 10).
12. In this regard, the "unrecognized" villages approximate what Giorgio Agamben has described as "the camp," identifying "a space that opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule." In fact, 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." Giorgio Agamben, "What Is a Camp?" in *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis, 2000), pp. 39 and 41. See also Adi Ophir, Michal Givoni, and Sari Hanafi, eds., *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion: Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (New York, 2009).
13. See Baruch Kimmerling, *Politicide: Sharon's War Against the Palestinians* (London, 2003), p. 3.

Goter

Al-Naqab, Palestine / Israel, 2002–03
Series of 42 photographs
39.5 × 59 cm; 59 × 39.5 cm
Gelatin silver prints; chromogenic prints

We should transform the Bedouin into an urban proletariat—in industry, services, construction, and agriculture. 88% of the Israeli population are not farmers, let the Bedouin be like them. Indeed, this will be a radical move which means that the Bedouin would not live on his land with his herds, but would become an urban person who comes home in the afternoon and puts his slippers on . . . [The children] will go to school, their hair combed and parted. This will be a revolution, but it can be achieved in two generations. Without coercion but with government direction . . . this phenomenon of the Bedouins will disappear.

Moshe Dayan, July 31, 1963

Since the mid-sixties the Palestinians of Bedouin descent, inhabitants of al-Naqab (Negev), have been subjected to a policy of dispossession of their traditional lands and relocation to seven townships planned by the Israeli government, largely without consulting the people affected. The land they leave behind is then made available for use by Jewish citizens.

In 2003 approximately half of the 110,000 Palestinian Bedouin in al-Naqab were living in these townships. According to official statistics, they were among the poorest of all communities in Israel, lacking sufficient public services, haunted by high rates of unemployment and criminality, and denied viable prospects of development.

The remaining half of the Palestinian Bedouin in al-Naqab refused to move to these townships to avoid losing their lands and being subjected to culturally adverse and socially degrading living conditions. They were living in more than one hundred "unrecognized" villages, where the laws of the Jewish State prohibited them from building permanent structures, where houses were regularly demolished, fields deemed illegal by the authorities and sprayed with toxic chemicals, families evicted from their homes, and where no public access to electricity, running water, or public services such as health care, sanitation, and education beyond primary school level was provided. To date, this situation has not substantially changed.

Goter is a word foreign to the Arabic language, used only by the Palestinians of al-Naqab. According to local people, it is derived from the English "Go there," a command Palestinian Bedouin would hear from the military during the era of the British Mandate (1917–48).

The work addresses the position of the Palestinians of Bedouin descent in the State of Israel: where there is a house there is no home, where there is a home there is no house.

Palestinian Bedouin bears relation to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians in general, characterized by the long-standing project "that covers a wide range of social, political, and military activities whose goal is to destroy the political and national viability of a whole community of people and thus deny it the possibility of genuine self-determination."[14] Such a project corresponds to a view of the Palestinians as possessing "relative humanity," and therefore as "entitled to only a subset of the otherwise inalienable rights that are due to 'full' humans," as explains Omar Barghouti.[15]

Given such state policies and biopolitical conditions, it is no wonder that Palestinian writers and activists like Edward Said repeatedly expressed the fear of disappearance during the nineteen-eighties and nineties: "Certainly, the destruction of Palestine in 1948, the years of subsequent anonymity, the painful reconstruction of an exiled Palestinian identity, the efforts of many Palestinian political workers, fighters, poets, artists, and historians to sustain Palestinian identity—all of these have teetered alongside the confounding fear of disappearance, given the grim determination of official Israel to hasten the process to reduce, minimize, and ensure the absence of Palestinians as a political and human presence in the Middle Eastern equation."[16] It is the architectural, geographic, institutional, social, and visual evidence of the policy of bringing about the disappearance of a people that Shibli's *Goter* and *Unrecognised* show—particularly in the obscured figures, fragmented faces, ethereal, silhouetted bodies, and forlornly empty domestic spaces, which characterize and haunt her photographic imagery. It is as if the existential reality of absence already pervades these scenes, glimpsing a future desertion, places of abandonment, and a vanishing people.

Of course absence and disappearance correspond to photography's condition as a medium, which Shibli's project develops by cannily placing medium and geopolitics in relation. As described by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida,* photography's ontology fundamentally concerns death. Death is the *eidos* of photography, its ideal form and most distinguished expression.[17] In fact, there can be no photograph that does not render absent what it represents. Eduardo Cadava usefully explicates Barthes's argument, where he writes that "the conjunction of death and the photographed is in fact the very principle of photographic certitude: the photograph is a cemetery. A small funerary monument, the photograph is a grave for the living dead. It tells their history—a history of ghosts and shadows—and it does so because it *is* this history."[18] It is not surprising, then, that the result of Shibli's joining of photography to political non-recognizability is a haunting aesthetics of hallucination—consider the ghostly presences of martyrs that serve as funerary monuments in the cemetery of public space in *Death,* or the fleeting, obscured, and blurred figures in *Goter,* as well as that series' portrayal of evacuated and uninhabited locales that somehow speak to the striking presence of absence in what are homeless spaces. All express the haunting of that which refuses disappearance. In other words, it is precisely the conjunction of death and the photographed that Shibli explores.

One aspect of this conjunction is that in Shibli's hands the photograph becomes an insistent act of retaining the presence of the disappeared and displaced, the absented and dead, providing evidence of an existence that has otherwise been denied, controlled,

14. Kimmerling 2003 (see note 13), p. 3. For Ilan Pappe and other dissident historians, Israeli policy since 1948 has been consistent in working toward the resettlement of Palestinians outside of Israel (including the territories occupied in 1967), encouraged via economic pressure, land appropriation, settler activity, and military violence—what Pappe terms "ethnic cleansing." See Ilan Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford, 2001). Pappe urges his readers to understand "the ethnic cleansing by Israel of the Palestinians," which "started in 1948 but continues, in a variety of means, to today," as a "crime against humanity" (pp. 8 and 5).
15. As Barghouti elaborates, "I define relative humanity as the belief, and relative-humanization as the practice based on that belief, that certain human beings, who share a specific common religious, ethnic, cultural or other similarly substantial identity attributes, lack one or more of the necessary attributes of being human, and are therefore human only in the relative sense, not absolutely, and not unequivocally. Accordingly, such relative humans are entitled to only a subset of the otherwise inalienable rights that are due to 'full' humans." Omar Barghouti, "Relative Humanity: The Fundamental Obstacle to a One-State Solution in Historic Palestine," in *The Electronic Intifada,* January 6, 2004, http://electronicintifada.net (accessed October 26, 2012).
16. Edward Said, "Preface," in *The Question of Palestine* (London, 1992). For a more recent approach to the social reality of Palestinian everyday life, see Saree Makdisi, *Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation* (New York, 2008).
17. Barthes 1993 (see note 7), p. 15.
18. Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton, 1997), p. 10.

Trackers
Palestine / Israel, 2005
Series of 85 photographs
37 × 55.5 cm; 55.5 × 37 cm; 60 × 90 cm; 90 × 60 cm
Gelatin silver prints; chromogenic prints

Trackers is a series of photographs taken in 2005 depicting Palestinians of Bedouin descent who served or are serving as volunteers in the Israeli Army. The project is concerned with the price a colonized minority is forced to pay to the majority of colonizers, perhaps to be accepted, perhaps to change its identity, perhaps to survive, or perhaps all this and more.

walled in, imprisoned, bordered up, exiled. Shibli's is an act of intervening in the organization of appearance so that those normally denied representation—physically, architecturally, spatially, politically, and visually—are brought to light. In this sense, her project resonates with the politicization of the photographic, moving beyond a purely Barthesian meditation on the deathly and uncanny aesthetics of the photographic image. Indeed, her work pushes Barthes's aesthetics of subjective judgment toward an insistence on making a claim for appearance that is also a political subjectivation. That subjectivation is a coming-into-being, a participation in the formation of the visible world, and a claiming of rights for those in that world, rights that extend beyond the repressive nation-state and its colonial project.[19] Against the state's social and political segregations, Shibli's photography constitutes a demand for the universality of rights, equality, and inclusion beyond those regimes that would divide and seclude, produce states of exception and relative humanity, and carry out programs of politicide.

As such, Shibli's works articulate the hopefulness of a photography that contests the injustice of the situation of the dispossessed, and creates a zone of political participation beyond the state's exclusive governmental politics. The hope is that photography's rearrangement of the visual world will make a difference in social and political reality, which it surely does, though perhaps without the instrumentalized precision and strategic effectiveness some demand. In the meantime, we have the silent witnessing and subtle questioning of Shibli's images, which testify to the diversity and creativity of the life of those subjects consigned to absence and abstraction, or reduced to humanitarian victimhood and the state's statistical calculations (particularly in the Palestinian occupied territories).[20]

Still, Shibli's practice adds nuance to the politics of recognition by bringing out the impossibility of documentary legibility, as indicated earlier. Given her photographs' exposure of fragmentation and abstraction, they consequently avoid falling into the trap of constituting a second order of victimization by reduplicating in representation the subjection found in reality. In this sense, Shibli's work complicates the urgency of recognizing the unrecognized by acknowledging a simultaneous aesthetic injunction *against* representation, which takes on meaning insofar as such photography is able to elicit the complexity of being human in part by avoiding the totalizing objectification of that being. As Judith Butler points out, "for representation to convey the human . . . representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give."[21]

In this regard, Shibli's images of the unrecognized, which acknowledge precisely that paradox, cannot be easily redeemed, and cannot fit unproblematically into the model of a documentary photography based on liberal empathy—for injustice is shown in her work without extending a sense of hopefulness or promised redemption to the viewer that some imminent transformation will occur as a result of the photographic intervention.[22] This fact in part extends from Shibli's refusal to objectify her subjects for the gaze of the empathic viewer. As Loock explains, "even though her practice takes the form of documentary, the focus of her work is not an inventory of given situations, a record of sociological or ethnological circumstances, let alone the illustration of preconceived cultural knowledge."[23] Rather than offering a source of sociological data or ethnographic information, Shibli's photographs

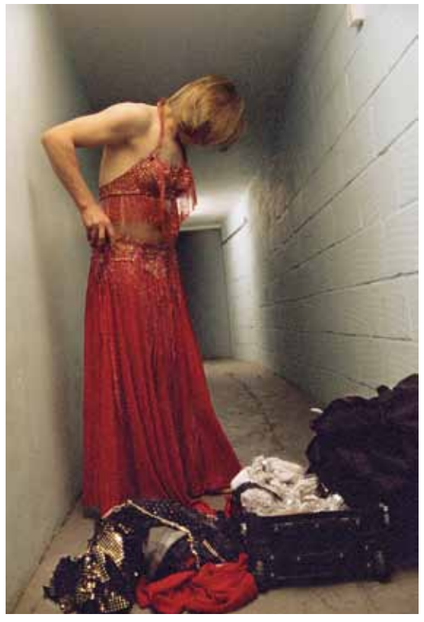
19. See Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography,* trans. Rela Melazi and Ruvik Danieli (New York, 2008), p. 118: against restricting citizenship to a "status, either innate or acquired under stringent conditions," photography turns "citizenship into the arena of a constant becoming, together with other (non)citizens," and allows "the citizen and the noncitizen . . . to continue voicing civilian grievances despite the 'natural and unalienable rights of man' continuing to be grasped as the reason and condition for citizenship." Yet one also finds in Barthes the recognition of such a politics—even if underdeveloped—particularly where he writes: "The photographer must then do his utmost to keep the photo from becoming Death"; and against becoming a photographic object: "It is my *political* right to be a subject which I must protect." See Barthes 1993 (see note 7), pp. 14 and 15.
20. On the violence of humanitarianism and the state's calculating machine that reduces life to statistical measurements in the Israeli / Palestinian context, see Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London, 2011).
21. Judith Butler, "Precarious Life," in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, 2004), p. 144.
22. For a recent (and problematic) plea for photographic empathy, contra to the critiques of writers such as Susan Sontag and Allan Sekula, see Susie Linfield, "Photojournalism and Human Rights," in *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago, 2010).
23. Loock 2009 (see note 6).

Eastern LGBT
International, 2004 / 06
Series of 37 photographs
37.8 × 57.6 cm; 57.6 × 37.8 cm; 70 × 100 cm; 100 × 70 cm
Gelatin silver prints; chromogenic prints

LGBT is an acronym signifying Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender.

The work depicts people from eastern societies such as Pakistan, Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey, or Somalia, who left their places of birth because their original societies prevented them from living according to their sexual preferences, or to inhabit the gendered body in which they feel at home. In a foreign place, and sometimes only on weekends in a club, they seek conditions that allow them to be who they want to be.

The pictures of *Eastern LGBT* were taken in 2004 and 2006 in Zurich, Barcelona, Tel Aviv, and London.



highlight the complicated aspects of their aesthetic condition, and elicit the multifaceted nature of lived experience and subjective reality. They do this by bringing out an ambiguity and multivalence in the image that announces the fact that photography can only signal the abundance of meaning that inevitably escapes its grasp, but which any documentary practice with any conceptual ambition will acknowledge, as if "it must *show* its failure" to represent in order "to convey the human."

Being sensitive to the unrepresentable that she nevertheless seeks to represent—both attempting to show those who are "unrecognized" and to show the ultimate unrepresentability of their being—Shibli has also in recent years sought to extend her practice to other sources of struggle and to other sites of unrepresentability. She has thereby proposed a chain of equivalences that broadens her photographic politics and that challenges oppression and dispossession in different geopolitical contexts, by placing the Palestinian struggle in relation to political struggles elsewhere. As such, the broadening of her photographic view of the world creates possibilities for forms of solidarity with different communities and modes of identity beyond Palestine and Israel.

Take *Eastern LGBT,* which shows those who make gender-bending appearances in public space (LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, a term commonly used by those who form its community). One photograph from a related series *(LGBT A,* which is part of *LGBT A B C),* shows two figures with shaved heads, one in a pin-striped suit and tie wearing sun glasses, the other with an artificial moustache and a dark dress with a shiny, light vinyl coat. As a couple, they pose in front of two of Shibli's photographs from *Unrecognised,* making the connection between Palestinians and figures subjected to a different sort of non-recognition owing to their sexual orientation. This form of non-recognition has ended up excluding people from their communities and homeland because of the cultural intolerance of, and discrimination against, whoever deviates from normative sexuality and gender types. Other images in the series show scenes from gay pride parades, various sorts of trannies getting dressed or prowling around housing estates, posing for the camera in generic hallways, or wearing various exotic or fetishistic costumes. They apply makeup, attending to their appearance in mirrors, and are shown dancing in club environments.

In *LGBT C* one figure appears under spotlights at a nightclub, positioned in front of a banner displaying the rainbow symbol of diversity and advertising the Aswat Group: "We are Palestinian. We are Women. We are Gay." These are displays of empowerment, wherein participants create a festive atmosphere in which the performance of subjectivity joins expatriatism, queer transgression, and political resistance. These figures thus reject socio-sexual discrimination and geopolitical dispossession in turn, and Shibli shows them reclaiming their sense of agency via their radical politics. Her photographic perspective endows these figures with dignity and affirmation, countering the voyeuristic objectification with which they are sometimes portrayed, adding anti-spectacular images of everyday life as well.

With *Dom Dziecka. The house starves when you are away,* Shibli extends further her photographic approach to communities of the dislocated and dispossessed. In this case, the images show various groupings of orphans photographed at eleven children's homes in Poland. Some of the images evidence a clear stylistic relation to her portrayals of Palestinian contexts, as in *Goter, Unrecognised,* or *Arab al-Sbaih.* For instance, the black-and-white depiction of boys and young men appearing in front and on top of concrete buildings, lacking any decoration or embellishment, bears similarity to the Palestinian areas of claustrophobia and deprivation, control and occupation, presented in Shibli's other works. Her point of view in these images is distanced from her subjects, as if indicating that the photographer stands apart, on the outside, which adds to the melancholy mood and the sense of watching a situation from afar that one has no control over. In other pictures from the same series, figures appear blocking their faces or are shown turning away from the camera, as if they are asserting defiance before the photographer's intrusions. Or perhaps she included these obscured images to suggest the impossibility of representing the subject, a further recognition of the subjective facets that extends beyond what any single photograph can represent, where representational fragmentation paradoxically counters relative humanization.[24] Here too, the photographs alternate between black-and-white and

24. I explore this argument further in T.J. Demos, "Recognizing the Unrecognized: The Photographs of Ahlam Shibli," in *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham, 2013), pp. 124–43.

Arab al-Sbaih
Jordan, 2007
Series of 47 photographs
38 × 57.7 cm; 57.7 × 38 cm
Gelatin silver prints; chromogenic prints

The photographs constituting *Arab al-Sbaih* were taken in four different places: the Irbid Refugee Camp, Irbid City, the al-Baqa'a Refugee Camp, and Amman. Three generations of Palestinian refugees have been living there since the 1948 war that followed the declaration of the Israeli State and resulted in the Palestinian *Nakba*.

The title of the series references the original name of the village Arab al-Shibli in the Lower Galilee of Palestine (currently Israel). A part of the villagers who fought for their lands in 1948 against the Jews were expelled to Syria and Jordan; the other part took shelter at the Mount Tabor Monastery. After several months of hiding in caves on the land of the monastery, at the end of the war, the families who managed to return to their homes had to change the original name of the village, Arab al-Sbaih, to Arab al-Shibli in order to protect themselves from Israeli revenge. The refugees in Syria and Jordan on the other hand are preserving the memory of their homeland by naming their shops after places in Palestine and reproducing the social structure of their original villages.

color images, a formal approach that emphasizes representational diversity and alludes to subjective diversity, and thus to the necessarily fragmentary character of photography. If necessarily fragmentary, then Shibli's images take on a self-reflexive value in that they acknowledge the impossibility of the total capture or complete portrayal of the subject. But in this case, it is not simply to indicate social or political disenfranchisement or alienating dislocation, but rather to allude to the depth and multiplicity of being that transcends the image and which the image can only indicate.

Part of that depth and multiplicity is expressed via the social connection between these figures, as the photographs reveal the communal bonds between these children without families, these inhabitants of a home for the homeless. The series highlights their common activities: the sleeping of several figures in the same room, the various embraces of intimacy, the situations of familiarity even in contexts of showering and washing, where boys and girls attend to personal hygiene. They sit together, read together, lie on each other's laps. As figures who, in Shibli's images, always appear in plural groupings, they comprise portraits of orphans who have made a kind of home for themselves. The images thus testify to something fundamentally human, even while there is also a social transgression in these groupings that compose relations outside of family connections, and thereby extend the social possibilities of being human. They depict the state of sociability and highlight the desire and need of people to exist in communities. Whether in situations of oppression and colonization *(Unrecognised),* or of exclusion and discrimination *(Eastern LGBT),* or of being without a family *(Dom Dziecka. The house starves when you are away)*—in each case, one discovers the powerful will to being-with-others, the desire for contact, friendship, love and solidarity, and the drive to find or construct a home (if unconventional) against the pressures of being disowned and displaced.[25]

That said, some of Shibli's most complicated images explore the disturbing instability between victim and perpetrator, freedom fighter and colonizer. For *Trauma,* she photographed veterans in France who experienced the persecution of Nazis as a result of their resisting the German occupation during World War II. The piece's historical point of departure is June 9, 1944, when the Nazi SS publicly executed ninety-nine people in Tulle by hanging them from lamp posts and balconies in the main street, and deported others to concentration camps where death was a likely fate. The city holds annual commemorations of those who suffered this atrocity, and the memory of the history lives on through the plaques, street names, public monuments, inscriptions on graves, commemorative rituals, and a museum that honors the French martyrs. These diverse sites of collective remembrance comprise the subjects of Shibli's photographs. Yet there is more, as the mementos appearing in some of her images also include photographs and maps of North Africa, which have been saved by one French veteran. These records reveal that some of the survivors of the German occupation went on to join the French colonial forces in Indochina and Algeria in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. In focusing on these details, Shibli joins these different histories together without resolution. The photographic series becomes an archive of disjunction and political contradiction, wherein victim and perpetrator inexplicably switch sides at different historical periods. In this sense, the series recalls Shibli's investigation of *Trackers* (2005), her photographs of Palestinians of Bedouin descent who have enlisted in the Israel Defense Forces in order to gain recognition and material benefits, such as a house, but who in doing so court accusations of betraying their community.[26] The question conjured in these various images is how those persecuted in one context could go on to visit military violence and occupation on others elsewhere.[27] Shibli's photographs don't condemn or draw conclusions, however; rather, they present a visual archive of the material effects,

25. On the fact that being is always "being-in-common," relational yet non-absolute and non-substantial, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis, 1991).
26. See Ulrich Loock. "Ahlam Shibli: Resisting Oppression," in *Camera Austria* 93 (March 2006), pp. 41–52; and *Ahlam Shibli: Trackers,* ed. Adam Szymczyk (Cologne, 2007) (with essays by John Berger, Jean-François Chevrier, Okwui Enwezor, Rhoda Kanaaneh, and Adam Szymczyk).
27. Said, for example, was well aware of this historical irony regarding the troubling uncanniness of the situation whereby many Palestinians have been ejected from Palestine by Israelis banished from Europe: "to have been exiled by exiles." Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Granta* 13 (Autumn 1984), p. 164.

The Valley

Arab al-Shibli, Palestine / Israel, 2007–08
Series of 28 photographs
38 × 57.7 cm; 57.7 × 38 cm
Gelatin silver prints; chromogenic prints

The images of *The Valley* were taken in 2007 in the village Arab al-Shibli and its lands in the Lower Galilee of Palestine / Israel.

On October 28, 1957 twenty-eight honorables of the village Arab al-Shibli wrote a letter to Mr. Elisha Soltz, the Israeli military governor in Nazareth. In this letter three requests were addressed to him. He was asked:

1. to return their lands, build an asphalt road to the village, and supply it with water and electricity;
2. to issue an order for the money that had been collected from the village people to be transferred back to them so they could build a school;
3. to allow the building of houses in the village and to add the name of the village to the map of the country—the "holy homeland map," in their words.

In that letter, the village representatives explained their situation: they had good relations with their Jewish neighbors, the people of Kfar Tavor, and the Jewish district commander before the 1948 war. At that time, the two sides agreed that the people of the Arab village and their Jewish neighbors would keep relations between them brotherly and refrain from ethnic segregation. Both sides would protect the other after the war, whether within an Arab or a Jewish state. The agreement was signed by the representative of the village that at that time was called Arab al-Sbaih, the representative of Kfar Tavor, and the Jewish district commander.

In 1950, two years after the war and the establishment of the State of Israel, however, the men of Arab al-Shibli were requested to meet at the Kadoorie School with the Israeli military governor, the official in charge of so-called absentee property and the headmaster of the school. They were asked to exchange lands for one year: the good lands on the east side of Wadi al-Midy that were officially owned by the people who had stayed in the village, for the fallow lands of the people who had fled the village on the west side of Wadi al-Midy, which had been appropriated by the State of Israel. The village people accepted and an agreement was signed in three copies. Each party received their own copy, but the Israeli district commander asked to have the village's copy in order to keep it safe. Time passed and the other side refused to give back the lands. The Israeli district commander denied the agreement. The village people were asked to keep quiet, and they did.

In 1952 things became worse. People from the village were arrested and others not allowed to leave the village.

In 1954 the state official in charge of absentee property came to the village and claimed the lands that had belonged to the refugees and were given to the village people in the agreement of 1950.

In 1957, when the village people asked for permission to build houses in their village, their request was rejected with the argument that their village didn't exist on the state map.

Also, the transfer of 3,000 lira that had been collected through the office of the Israeli Ministry of Finance in Nazareth from the village people, in order to build a school instead of renting spaces in the village, was denied and the project was not implemented.

The letter ended by reminding the Israeli military governor that the village had been renamed after one of the seven families that had been living there already during the time of the British Mandate, the Shibli family. The relations between the different families had always been problematic. The Shibli family, they wrote, was the family that had remained in Israel after the war, and they didn't want to keep the original name of the village, Arab al-Sbaih.

mementos, and documentary recordings of sites of public and private remembrance that open up these very difficult questions.

As we have seen, Shibli's recent series *Death* signals a further shift in her practice, insofar as these images focus not so much on actual people, but rather on representations of the disappeared. As such, the photographs constitute a reflexive gesture, investigating the social use of images, inquiring into the aesthetics of commemoration and the politics of recognition in everyday life. The series refers largely to the context of the Second Intifada, the uprising that began in September 2000, sparked by Ariel Sharon's provocative visit, along with 1,000 security men, to al-Haram al-Sharif (literally "the Noble Sanctuary," the location of the al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock), known to Jews as the Temple Mount. The protests were further inflamed by the death of Mohammad al-Durrah, the twelve-year-old shot dead in his father's arms on September 30, an event captured photographically and widely seen, reinforcing perceptions of Israel's contempt for Palestinian rights and lives. In the following years, the uprising brought about the militarization of Palestinian society, distinct from the demonstrations and social projects including community gardens and food production cooperatives, which were part of the popular mobilization that characterized the First Intifada (1987–93).[28]

Since 2000, several thousand Palestinians have been killed by Israeli security forces, many memorialized with a martyr funeral.[29] As we have seen, the commemorations frequently include posters and photographs hung in family sitting rooms, placed in the vicinity of the martyr's home, in restaurants, inside and outside of shops, around schools and hospitals. By focusing on these diverse sites, Shibli shows how the national becomes familiar, and the political intimate, the ubiquity of such images suggesting that anyone could become a martyr at any moment. Despite the various approaches to martyr imagery as evidenced in Shibli's study, the designs of the posters provide little direction to differentiate between martyrdom operators, armed fighters, youth shot during protests, and innocent bystanders (men, women, children) killed in Israeli attacks, each case turning the represented Palestinian into an icon of the national resistance. As such, the posters affirm the "non-hierarchical unity of the Palestinians' collective national fate."[30] By showing the multiplicity of martyr images, *Death* reveals how this social diversity is made to conform to a certain problematic visual homogeneity.

The aestheticization of death is, however, at best ambiguous, as martyr imagery inevitably escapes its instrumentalized purpose. Indeed, studies of martyr commemorations stress the diverse interpretations of their meaning and the sometimes conflictual relations of viewers to such images, with people in everyday life at times questioning or even rejecting the political messages. The militant groups' use of such images as publicity-seeking practices might even be criticized, and the rhetoric derided by some Palestinians fed up with the cult of death, the directions of the militarized and violent response to the occupation, and the banal repetitions and routinizations of the seemingly endless commemorations of the dead.[31] The aesthetics of martyr memorializations thus form an uncertain oscillation between socio-political compliance and factional conflict, between devotional practices and critical distance. Shibli's portrayal of the diversity of images and their contexts of reception reveals these antinomies, rather than merely extending the ritualistic commemorations themselves. Still, her series remains a testimony to the destruction of Palestinian lives and how death inspires future resistance.

Shibli's work also frequently includes indexes of the photographer's own involvement in the production

28. See Salim Tamari and Reema Hammami, "The Second Uprising: End or New Beginning?" in *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 30.2 (Winter 2001), pp. 5–25.
29. See the statistics on fatalities kept by the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (B'Tselem): http://www.btselem.org/statistics (accessed October 26, 2012).
30. Allen 2006 (see note 1), p. 120. As Allen points out, the term "martyr" *(Shaheed)* is the term commonly used by Palestinians to designate anyone considered to have died as a result of the occupation, whether Christians or Muslims, combatants or bystanders. "Martyrs are people who were killed, whether at the hands of soldiers or settlers, or as a result of checkpoints and curfews that have, for instance, prevented access to medical care." Further: "The label 'martyr' is, therefore, itself a form of respect; the term expresses all these sedimented meanings of honor, reverence and distinction accrued from Islamic and nationalist teaching," pp. 130–31, note 2.
31. Allen cites Allen Feldman's observation that "[s]acrificial violence creates generic subjects as raw material vulnerable to labile objectification, for the process of sacrifice requires actors who can assume multiple collective meanings and absorb and reflect back diverse and often contradictory collective fantasies." However, she may overstate the common resistance to mentor commemorations in everyday life. Allen 2006 (see note 1), p. 122.

Dom Dziecka. The house starves when you are away
Poland, 2008
Series of 35 photographs
38 × 57.7 cm; 57.7 × 38 cm
Gelatin silver prints; chromogenic prints

Dom Dziecka (in English "children's home") is a series of photographs taken in 2007 at eleven orphanages in Poland. The work exposes the living conditions of children who haven't grown up in a family home, but in a foster institution.

During the day the children are hardly ever alone; physical relations between the children, even adolescent boys and girls, are often very close, without being necessarily sexual in character. The individual children seem to merge into a collective body, from which they withdraw only when going to sleep; the conventional family unit is turned into a children's society in which typical family relations are not only substituted but actually displaced to form a new and specific constellation.

Where the family home is missing, something else has developed. One boy, Dawid Redes from Dom Dziecka Na Zielonym Wzgórzu in Kisielany-Zmichy, said, "it's not a children's home, it's home."

of her photographs: in some of her images, we can see the photographer's shadow, just as much as the oblique perspectives, various distances, and diverse locations indicating her agency in constructing these images. Similarly, the photographs of graveyards signal the photographer's presence among the graves, as much as the other images from the *Death* series also show young people lingering among places of commemoration, and the posters sometimes being presented by the relatives of the deceased to the photographer. In other words, Shibli's representational aesthetics brings about a certain resuscitation of life, even while the images depict the traces of loss and absence.

If *Death* presents representations of representations, it is in fact not altogether new in Shibli's work—think of the pop-cultural posters and wall decorations in *Dom Dziecka. The house starves when you are away,* or the visual archive of historical photographs documented in *Trauma,* which also indicate the social function of photography in various contexts embedded in the web of life. The difference is that *Death* focuses on how the dead figure in the political program of various militant organizations, whether enlisted by voluntary submission, cooperative acts of political participation, or via co-optation by militant groups. Unlike the martyr posters, Shibli's photographs make it impossible to reduce her subjects to single images, to expressions of an agenda, to the manipulated material of a political program. Her series consequently takes on a certain critical relation to its subject.

Could the state of being unrecognized ever become a part of an ethico-political stance? "It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home," Edward Said explained in the late nineteen-nineties, finding a way to articulate the ethical challenges of displacement by invoking the phrasing of Theodor Adorno, who wrote those words himself during his forced exile from Nazi Germany.[32] For how can one yearn for belonging to a national culture that is, as in the German Nazi case, ethically and politically abominable? For Said, the question translated into the impossible condition of exile and dislocation for Palestinians, where the condition of statelessness equaled a decisive politics of resistance, a refusal to be at home in a situation of dispossession. Rather than propose anything like a simple analogy to that catastrophic history of World War II, Said's own sense of homelessness led him nonetheless to consider critically Adorno's ethical imperative in his time, just as Shibli visualizes this paradoxical condition today.

Rather than submit to the recognition of a photographic message and be reduced to communication or propaganda, Shibli's photographs evince a quality of subjective and social liberation in the state of being unrecognized, for that status blocks recognition as a mode of control or essentialization, even while her work also investigates non-recognition as a space of existential exposure. Her work thus defies the production of conventional forms of stereotypical being, according to which normality is produced by its opposition to the excluded and unrecognized. If Shibli's project reclaims non-recognition as an emancipatory project, then it is nonetheless distinct from the function of non-recognition as a politics of control in the hands of an oppressive state or militia. As we have seen, Shibli's work represents a multivalent exploration of the will to community and a shared home—which her photographs situate as a mode of being as much as a political struggle—made in the various circumstances of homelessness today inside and outside of Palestine. In this regard, her photography acknowledges precarity as a source of human community, even while contesting its forms of social exclusion and political-economic inequality, which become the targets of common struggle.[33]

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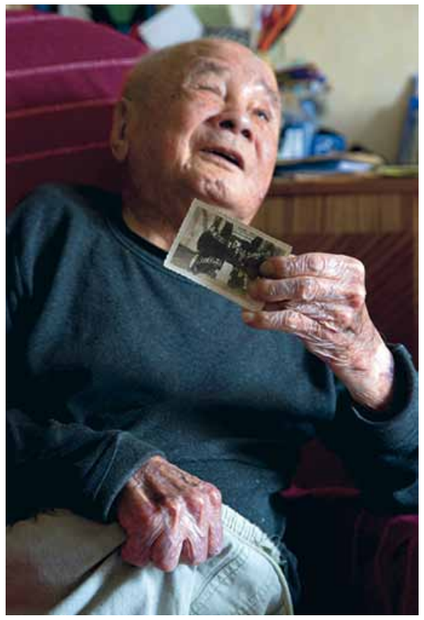
32. In his essay "Between Worlds," in *London Review of Books* 20.9, May 7, 1998, p. 6, Edward Said cites Theodor Adorno's text from *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life,* trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York, 1991), p. 39.
33. Judith Butler, "For and Against Precarity," in *Tidal: Occupy Theory* 1 (2011), pp. 12–13.

Trauma

Corrèze, France, 2008–09
Series of 48 photographs
38 × 57.7 cm; 57.7 × 38 cm
Gelatin silver prints; chromogenic prints



Taking as its starting point commemorations of the *Résistance* uprising against the Nazis in Tulle (Corrèze, France) and the occupation forces' murderous repercussions, events that lasted from June 7 to 9, 1944, *Trauma* is constructed around the fact that one and the same population, in certain cases even the same individuals, who resisted occupation by the Germans and suffered from their atrocities, waged, a few years later, colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria against peoples who, in their turn, claimed independence.

Early on June 9, 1944, the SS rounded up more than two thousand men from Tulle, aged sixteen to sixty, and later that day hanged ninety-nine of them from lamp posts and balconies. Another 149 men were deported to German concentration camps from where 101 never returned.

Memorials and ceremonies honor those who died in the First and Second World Wars: soldiers, fighters of the *Résistance,* and civilian victims of the Nazis, together with members of the French army who lost their lives in the colonial wars in Indochina and North Africa.

The images show various residents of Corrèze: former members of the *Résistance*, descendents of the hanged and deported from June 9, former French fighters in the colonial wars, *Pieds-Noirs,* as well as an Algerian collaborator, a man who was taken to France as a forced laborer from Indochina, a second generation Indochinese, a lady of Algerian descent who considers herself French, and recent immigrants from Algeria.

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