Visual Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rvst20

Negotiating representation in Israel and Palestine
Huw Wahl
Published online: 27 Jan 2014.

To cite this article: Huw Wahl (2014) Negotiating representation in Israel and Palestine, Visual Studies, 29:1, 1-12, DOI: 10.1080/1472586X.2014.862988

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2014.862988

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Negotiating representation in Israel and Palestine

HUW WAHL

Do you think we are not the audience of our image as well? – Yazan Al-Khalili

In the summer of 2012, I travelled to Israel and Palestine to explore the notion of photographic representation in this heavily documented region and to understand how local visual practitioners negotiated the work of photography in relation to their own identities and opinions on the conflict. I was interested in how they dealt with issues such as victimhood, the ambiguous nature of photography and their position in relation to the press and broadcast media. The photo-essay presented here combines my photographs with quotations from interviews I conducted with photographers and arts practitioners during this visit. It does so in order to develop a reflexive interpretation of the practice of making images and the place of photography in this situation of political conflict.

During my stay I listened to what visual practitioners thought photography could do, its positive and negative uses within the situation, and how they felt about the place where they lived being represented globally through, often repetitive, media images focusing on conflict. I was able to spend time with some of the people I spoke to, and observe the ways in which they went about their practice. My photographs were highly influenced by the topics we discussed and I became increasingly aware of the structures and influences we draw upon when making images in situations we already feel we 'know' through the images we have seen.

After returning from the region, I edited the interviews and the photographs into a short, multimedia 'visual essay', choosing to show uncaptioned images alongside the voices of those I had interviewed, both Israeli and Palestinian. The intention was to open up the ambiguity, and allow space for new thoughts to take place. I did not wish to pin down the images with captions, but rather allow them to ask their own questions. At times the voices and images aligned, at others they worked in counterpoint. Rather than spelling out who was speaking or being photographed, I wanted to use the ambiguity of voice and image to disrupt assumptions about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and its representation. In the same spirit, the quotations here do not belong to one or other of the images, but should be approached as parallel texts, presenting an opportunity for the images and words to speak together on the page, to continue opening up the gaps in our thinking towards a subject we may feel we know all too well.

Huw Wahl is an artist using photography in ways strongly driven by observational and anthropological approaches. The acknowledgement of political and social viewpoints is very important to his work and he is interested in how photography can act as an alternative, albeit temporary, domain through which it becomes possible to reflect on issues of power and humanity. To see more work please visit http://www.hctwahl.com.
Newspapers used to have their own staff... but they don’t use their own staff anymore, so most of the people are working for agencies, and the main interest of the agency is to sell. So the images have to be clear, high quality, not ambiguous, like you understand the message, and nice! Something you can sell. People will like! And they are all shooting the same. (Miki Kratsman)
Photographers... I don’t know if they’re a third party, they’re an additional party to the conflict. And they also have a role and an influence on the way things develop in any given situation. And yeah, you almost rarely see pictures that include images of other photographers. (Mati Milstein)
Because it looks a bit odd to see... your focus is on a particular event, and the characters in this event. Therefore if you have a photographer or cameraman inside the frame it kind of distracts I think from the actual action, because you have somebody in the frame that is not at the same stage as the others. It’s like adding another category, and then it’s more... confusing for the viewer in a way. (Ann Paq)
[Activists are] trying to sometimes supply really subversive content, and also use it in a way that would make it more complex, and allow this space, the space that is very, very limited, even today with the internet ... and still very much narrated by very strong forces you know, which are, for one the government, and second the media. (Yoav Gross)
Sometimes I’m bored with the way we’re portrayed, in a sense, as you say these stereotype images. And at the same time I feel, photographs are really a very very powerful tool about showing what’s happening … I don’t know if there’s an instance in the world where the general media can take up a mission to show something different, it’s individuals I think who will do that. (Tania Nasir)
If the editors change, the photographers change automatically. Maybe we need a new school of photography.

(Osama Silwadi)
I liked photojournalism, but I couldn’t do it without getting emotionally involved in what I see. It was very hard for me to see grieving, crying, funerals, it used to get to me so much. (Rula Halawani)
We usually say that photography is an extension of our sight or something that we see but, there is some truth to it when you realise that yes, when you photograph and you look at what you photograph you actually see it, it's the first time you really see it. But taking pictures is not natural, it's an artificial thing. And if you're taking responsibility over it, you can make 300, 400 pictures in a digital camera and who can take so much responsibility over so many pictures. (Gilad Ophir)
I’m very against I would say, the issue of victimhood. And I would totally differentiate between the victim and the oppressed. The victim is a very passive character, whereas the oppressed I believe is a different character, it’s an active character that tries to free itself from the oppression itself. Therefore the issue of image making and the image of representation differ between the victim and the oppressed. (Yazan Al-Khalili)
I don’t want to remain the victim, I think that’s it, I want to be on my own and not as a victim. Because I am, and yet I want to be free of that, and one way of freeing myself from being a victim...[is] to grow above it, to be solid inside, to be able to sustain this on-going suffering and tragedy. (Tania Nasir)
FIGURE 1. Ofer Prison, West Bank, June 2012. People demonstrate in support of prisoners participating in one of the largest hunger strikes in Palestinian history. Ofer prison is located near Ramallah in the West Bank and run by the Israeli Prison Services. Israel holds more than 4500 Palestinians in jail on charges that range from stone throwing to deadly attacks on Israeli targets. (Source: B’Tselem, ‘The Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.’ Accessed January, 2013. http://www.btselem.org/statistics/detainees_and_prisoners) Hunger strikes in protest at inhumane and abusive conditions, as well as detentions without charge or trial, have been growing over the past years. All photographs by Huw Wahl.

FIGURE 2. Nabi Saleh, West Bank, May 2012. Photojournalists photograph a boy dressed as Spiderman during the weekly protest in Nabi Saleh. Each Friday the village residents, joined by Israelis and foreign activists, try to march to their village spring which has been confiscated by Halamish, the settlement in the top right of this photograph. The Israeli Defence Force use tear gas, rubber-coated bullets and a foul smelling water canon nicknamed the ‘skunk canon’ to stop them.

FIGURE 3. Ofer Prison, West Bank, June 2012. Palestinian photojournalists talk with local children during a quiet moment at a demonstration outside Ofer prison in support of prisoners on hunger strike.

FIGURE 4. Negev Desert, Southern Israel, June 2012. An Israeli photographer demonstrates framing in a project encouraging the Bedouin communities in southern Israel to document themselves through portraiture, as a way of building a political archive. The Israeli Government regularly demolishes houses without permits in Israel as part of its policy of settling former nomadic Arab communities such as Bedouins in government-planned towns.

FIGURE 5. South Hebron Hills, West Bank, May 2012. Foreign activists document agricultural work by Palestinian cave dwellers in the South Hebron Hills. The caves and residential dwellings are regularly destroyed by Israeli forces claiming they do not have permits to live there. Palestinian and foreign activists provide help by building houses out of breezeblocks, which are also quickly knocked down.


FIGURE 7. East Jerusalem, Israel, May 2012. A Palestinian man is arrested following a protest against the Jerusalem Day march of the flags entering East Jerusalem. Jerusalem Day is the day on which Israeli nationalists celebrate the capture of East Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War. The annexation of East Jerusalem by Israel has never been recognised by international law.

FIGURE 8. Negev Desert, Southern Israel, June 2012. Young people from a Bedouin community take photographs of a house recently demolished by the Israeli forces.

FIGURE 9. South Hebron Hills, West Bank, May 2012. A foreign activist photographs a Palestinian child playing in a car while his community carries out agricultural work.

FIGURE 10. Qalandia Checkpoint, Israel, June 2012. View from a bus leaving Qalandia checkpoint as it enters Israel alongside the separation barrier. Qalandia separates the West Bank from Jerusalem; only Palestinians with special permits are allowed to enter Israel.

NOTES

[1] All the interviews, from which the quotations have been derived, were conducted by the author in May and June 2012. I am grateful to the following individuals for making time to discuss their work and views: Yazan Al-Khalili, Yoav Gross, Rula Halawani, Miki Kratsman, Mati Milstein, Tania Nasir, Gilad Ophir, Anne Paq and Osama Silwadi. I am also grateful to all those involved who let me photograph alongside them, and in doing so helped to facilitate this research.


REFERENCES