

Ron Amir, Involved in Photography

Noam Gal

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To choose photography as a medium of artistic expression has never been so difficult. With the complete transformation of the camera from a tool for creating images (like a paintbrush, let's say) into a communications mechanism (like the language we speak, a necessary mechanism everyone makes use of and takes for granted), the question of "what to photograph" can become a pressure, and can even be darkened by the uncertainty of "why photograph at all". Of course such worries don't halt the flow of creation in photography: the drive to make art is stronger than these questions, which are specific to photography. Literature writing, for example, has struggled with worries of this kind for centuries now – and literature is still alive. It's reasonable to assume that – similarly to what happens in the realm of literature, where being able to read and write doesn't turn everyone into a writer – being able to use a camera doesn't turn its users into artist-photographers. Yet today even this assumption is challenged, because it's not easy to look at a photographed image and immediately discern whether it was made by a "skilled poet" or

"someone who has just learned to read and write". We generally rely on the artistic or the academic establishment to teach us how to distinguish between a slip of the pen and a great work; but are the viewers at a photography exhibition really persuaded by sublime artistic quality, virtuosity acquired in the course of many years of life, exciting originality of thought – or do they, still, experience the niggling thought that "there are pictures like this one in my kid's cellphone too"?

Unlike photography's struggles to gain recognition as an art form, however, such misgivings were not born with the invention of the camera, and they have been growing ever since the museums received this civil medium into their bosoms, to meet the bewildered eyes of viewers of a generation in which we photograph before we look, even before what we've photographed has crossed the threshold of our consciousness. It is these doubts that have pushed artistic photography into routines of producing prints enlarged to fantastic dimensions, of limiting editions to several copies, of exhibiting photography in a space as if it were an installation; in brief: photography that puts itself out there as "unique".¹ Since the turn

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of the millennium we are witness to a growing divergence between three fronts: 1. a spectacular rise in the status of artistic photography in the world's display and sales spaces of contemporary art; 2. a dramatic increase in the volume of historical research and philosophical writing about social photography in the past and the present, especially in political and ethical contexts; 3. a significant and continuous decline in the presence of documentary photography and direct photography in the major museums and galleries in the world. On this background, especially in the framework of an art economy in which photography has finally gained its place, we need to look once again at the basic act of photography, the moment when artists decide to go out with their camera and document what they think deserves to be seen. Especially today, as the medium's flourishing becomes increasingly complicated, it's worthwhile to reexamine the direct photography in the art world.

Photography is a medium that is difficult to divide into kinds and genres, firstly because it is not an artistic tool but a means of expression which is used in a large and increasing number of disciplines: documentary photography, journalistic photography, fashion photography, scientific photography, social photography, political photography – categorizations that are at times historical and at times aesthetical. Hence the boundaries of the genre of "documentary" photography, which is the focus of our interest here, are discussed, retracted, and redefined again and again, as, say, direct photography that documents the reality around us in order to provoke awareness of it, beyond the flood of prejudices and world-views by dint of which we crystallize our identities and our attitudes to others. True, many people agree that the motivation for moving viewers to action (whether to oppose or repair the photographed phenomenon, or to support it) has been inherent in documentary photography since its beginnings – yet still, the very use of the term "documentary" provokes unease and differences

of opinion. People who presume to accept (or to reject) certain works into (or from) the field of documentary photography have always focused on the content of the photographs (do they deal with an urgent social issue?), their reliability (according to changing, but forever subjective criteria; at any rate, they're supposed to be "not manipulated"), the photographers' integrity (were they sent by an external paying client, or was it only their conscience that drove them to endanger themselves at the front?), the technology of the image production (who or what has access to take photographs in disaster zones?), or the question of its distribution (who will have access to the image, and how?) – while this last question is inseparably tied to the photographs' economic presence and value in the art world.

A synchronic reading of the history of newspapers and the history of photography will enable us to go back to the sources of these questions, at least since the time when the newspaper's editing room became one of the most effervescent arenas of photographic activity – and to go on to examine them in our own time, when the newspaper industry is crumbling concurrently with the dying of the convention that sees photography as an always-reliable means of direct documentation of reality?

Those who engage in writing the chronicles of photography (and we must keep in mind that this is a very young field of knowledge) generally place the peak of documentary photography in the mid-20th century, more or less between the establishment of the first agency for independent photographers, Magnum, after the Second World War by the photographers Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa – and the establishment of the International Center of Photography (ICP) about thirty years later, by Cornell Capa (Robert's brother). Between these they note "The Family of Man" – the most viewed photography exhibition ever (more than nine million viewers in about forty countries), which Edward Steichen curated in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York – as an exemplar of the status of documentary

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photography in the art field and beyond it.

According to Cornell Capa, the first function of the photographer is to be a witness to human situations while preserving his personal gaze and ensuring the aesthetic distinctiveness of his testimony – in contrast to the commercial representation prevalent in the mass media.¹ Terms he frequently used during the '60s were "the engaged photographer" or "the concerned photographer". Under such titles, in exhibitions and books, Capa collated works by a long list of photographers who had gone out to zones of war, famine or poverty and had brought back pictures that aimed, with their power, to influence public opinion in the West.



Margaret Bourke-White, *Gold Miners, South Africa*, 1928, b&w photograph, gelatin silver print; collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, gift to AFIM of Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago (B06.2688)

Half a century later, with the sidelining of documentary photography to the very peripheries of the art museums, the galleries, or the popular photography books, it is interesting to recall this chapter in the history of documentary photography and the powerful energy it projected during the '60s. It would be no exaggeration to state that documentary photography of this kind – the kind that "goes out there" to look and declares that looking itself is an important act – is today considered a subversive practice. Add to this the fact that such photography quite frequently chooses disputed social subjects that are therefore not palatable to collectors – and the subversive practice will redouble into a bold rebellion against the art economy and the social system at its base, even when the price for the rebellion is that such photography is pushed out of the contemporary art field.

The explanations for the decline in the status of documentary photography in the art world today are many and varied. The British theorist and curator David Company, who investigates the status of photography in our period, connects the distancing of harsh images of reality from artistic photography's display spaces with the replacement of the analog still camera by faster and more accessible digital technologies of documentation and reporting (continuous newscasts on television, YouTube, etc.) If photography possessing documentary characteristics does manage to infiltrate into museums and galleries, this will be "photography after the event", a photography of traces, of remains or remnants, mostly without any human presence, a photography that contains no drama and has no need to be chilling, memorable, effective. The customary connection between photographs and collective memory of historical events, says Company, cannot but unravel in an era where the immediate or the automatic is considered the most reliable (security cameras, for example). All that remains for stills photography is to express the silence after the maelstrom, the freeze that characterizes the

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appearance of things after the media coverage has lost interest in them. Company calls this genre "late photography", and what he says about it here may illuminate our discussion of the work of Ron Amir:

In forfeiting any immediate relation to the event and taking up a slower relation to time, 'late photographs' appear to separate themselves out from the constant visual stream emitted by the convergence of modern electronic image technologies. Part of the appeal of these static, slow and detailed photographs is that they strike us now as being somehow a new kind of 'pure' photography that can't be confused with other kinds of image (this is no doubt another reason for their profile in museums and galleries). They look like a very photographic kind of photography and seem to do something no other medium does, although as I have said, what strikes us as particularly photographic is very much subject to change. At the same time they refuse to be overtly 'creative', deploying the straight image with a mood of deliberation and detachment that chimes with a general preference in contemporary art for the slow, withdrawn and anonymous.⁴

Company, who describes the ways documentary photography is relocating itself in the art field, prefers to leave one important element out of the discussion – the ethical challenge not infrequently faced by photographers documenting grim human conditions. All of us know questions such as these: To present a picture of a starving child in Central Africa (with meticulous attention to the colors and the composition) to the eyes of a well-fed viewer – is that not in itself an immoral act? And how does such a photograph mobilize its viewers to act against the injustices it documents? And if it fails in this, what is the justification for its existence? Without going into this fascinating discussion,

which in itself arouses more confusions than acceptable answers, we need to draw conclusions from the concurrence of the philosophical offensive against documentary photography (for example in Susan Sontag's well-known book from 2003, *Regarding the Pain of Others*) and of the weakening of such photography's presence in the arenas of contemporary art (museums, galleries, private collections, art fairs).⁵



John Thomson, "Hooky Alf" of Whitechapel, 1881, b&w photograph, Woodburytype; collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, gift to AFIM of Mrs. and Mr. Dan Berley, New York (B84.0274-14)

Moreover, it's possible that beside this "late photography", which leans on contemporary art's affection for the "slow and anonymous" gaze, there is room for the inclusion of documentary photography of the kind that Ron Amir does, photography characterized by the photographer's extraordinary involvement in the milieu that he photographs – an involvement that is multi-faceted and sharp, that shifts the focus of the art work to

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beyond the categorizations of kinds of photography, and to beyond the residues of distinctions among art mediums at the present time.

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Among the photographers active in Israel in recent decades, Ron Amir's work stands out in its loyalty to the camp of politically-involved documentary photography. Why "involved"? What makes Amir's artistic actions "involved" in the deeper sense of the word? Is it the case that this is not just another sub-genre of documentary photography or photography in general, but an artistic practice that traverses mediums and that casts doubt on the necessity of categories in photography which is a part of the contemporary art field?

Firstly we must note that for Amir it is important to position himself, his camera, and then also the viewers, opposite a complex, often painful, reality of whose existence most of us are not aware. Thus, for example, in the years 2010–2011, Amir used to visit two construction sites in Kfar Saba where "illegal aliens" – Palestinians who work inside Israel's borders but lack the documents to cross the Separation Wall every day – were employed. In the *Invisible Presence* series that he created there, the workers are photographed inside sealed concrete spaces – "security rooms" that today are being built in every standard apartment. These rooms have no windows through which the illegals' sojourning might be detected in the evenings or weekends. Amir's art is based here on a point of departure of simple involvement: a reversal of our common attitude to the peripheries of the reality that surrounds us, which means ignoring them, justifying the existing order, focusing on ourselves. His art does indeed draw on Cornell Capa's humanistic alphabet, but it doesn't assume that it is art's duty to improve the condition of the photographed subjects, or to achieve a practical goal in the world. Amir's commitment

to photography is first and foremost a declaration of the very act of going out into the world and of encountering what is there, whatever the ramifications. Moreover, involvement is not identification, and we will err if we identify engagement with the peripheries of the field of vision and of life in this country with an ordered political doctrine. Going out to the peripheries starts with the basic experience of reaching a hand out to the other, in a simple gesture of openness, a request for acquaintance. Every new chapter in Amir's work – the project at the Holot detention facility, for example – begins first of all with a long series of visits to make acquaintance with the people in the milieu he wants to photograph, and this already blurs the boundary between doing and observing, the boundary upon which are based so many conventions about representation and about the connection between art and the political horizon it might have.



Nuni's Birthday, 2011, color photograph, inkjet print; courtesy of the artist

Amir's going "out there" thus always entails an actual involvement in the lives of the people he photographs. The most outstanding example of this is a his long-ranging work, in the years 2003–2014, in Jisr al-Zarqa, in the course of which he became closely acquainted with the inhabitants, was a guest in their homes, took photographs of family events, taught in the town,

and even established a photography studio in the local SYCC (Sport, Youth and Culture Center). An art project that goes on for such a long time inevitably bonds the artist's life with the lives of others, while the boundary drawn between art and life is not a sharp line but a wild frontier zone. Doron Rabina writes about this:

In Amir's presence, photography becomes a tool for creating interactions, for active engagement rather than mere observation. Such active engagement, moreover, cannot be taken for granted: intermingling is a dramatic and ambitious desire given the isolated existence of Jisr al-Zarqa's residents in a number of different contexts: geography (with the exception of the country's mixed cities, this is the only place where Arab residents live along Israel's shoreline); nationality (in relation to the Jewish population as well as in relation to Arab society), and socioeconomic status (in relation to the residents of Caesarea, who erected a dirt rampart to create a physical and cultural barrier between Caesarea and Jisr al-Zarqa).⁶

This involvement in the lives of the people he photographs is not one-sided, and the more these people let Amir into the details of their everyday lives, the more he, for his part, photographs not only according to his artistic aspirations. He does quite a lot of photography that the people in the milieu he is involved in ask for, like an events photographer, which of course makes things more difficult for anyone who wants to chart his work in terms of the conventions and values of the art world or of the media, which seek reliable reports from the actual locations. These distinctive ways of involvement yield products of diverse kinds, some of which were photographed not by Amir but by people he photographed, and some of them were photographed and printed in numerous copies for distribution to whoever in the photographed community requested one,

and in some of them Amir himself appears as a participant in the group whose story he is telling. These diverse materials are not initially intended for inclusion in a final art work as though they were planned parts of a multi-channel photo-installation or a broad-ranging research project in which all the outcomes are exhibited at the end of the process. When one joins Amir on several of his "outings", one quickly discovers that his involvement in the life of the photographed community often looks like just passing the time, as though it had nothing to do with visual art or with political activism. Involvement of this kind is cautious about defining its goals in advance, and defers decisions about "who will photograph" and "who will be photographed".

Like others who have written about Amir's work, Rabina mentions yet another mixture of involved photography – the calculated refraining from creating images that relate to a climactic event or that have a clear focus of attention. "These photographs capture no extreme events," writes Rabina, "at the very most they contain an 'event'. Their power stems from the insistence on lingering, on sustained observation, and on the value of the 'duration'. They exchange the 'decisive moment' for patience, and trade in the ultimate image for a gradually accumulating set of qualities."⁷

Amir's photographs, be they landscapes or interiors, will look as though they are delivering several messages simultaneously – the story of the social tribulation being documented, the story of the incessant creativity of the people subjected to this tribulation, and the story of the photographer himself in this milieu. Thus, for example, in his recurring visits to motor repair shops or to fishermen's huts in Jisr, Amir was drawn to photograph doodles on walls, objects and various ornaments used by the people he photographs to shape their surroundings [p. 22]. In these photographs there is no distinct single subject, and the frame as it were holds the cruising of the gaze over the surface of the space that contains both Amir's work and that of those he

photographs. Viewing these intermixed images, which do not direct the mind to a particular single message, requires in itself a willingness to sojourn, to linger opposite the image instead of seeking for a conclusion – a requirement to invest time, which we shall discuss again further on. This image has no distinct narrative focus, and Amir builds it meticulously. Far from him is the commissioned journalistic gesture of the snapshot, of the motion of photographers striving to reach the front of the event or the decisive moment. Here we see the explicit boundary between the characteristics of Amir's documenting photography (of the "late photography" kind Campamy describes) – and the characteristics of the traditions of photo-journalism or of humanistic photography (of the kind promoted by Cornell Capa, for example).

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In the summer of 2014, after several one-day visits in the Holot detention facility and becoming acquainted with the bustling activity of the asylum seekers around the compound, Amir started arriving there with more equipment and for longer periods. The equipment included an analog camera with a medium format and a large format, a video camera, tripods and plates, and a digital camera for producing small color photographs of groups of asylum seekers there. In some of these Amir is among those photographed, but in most of the cases he is the photographer, simple photos to be distributed and returned to the photographed subjects. From this we can grasp the deep meaning that Amir attributes to time: the duration of the photographing, the continuousness of the project, the time that passes for the detainees there, the time that they pass, the time it takes him to produce a picture. Photographing in such formats – while using an analog camera with 4x5 plates – is today considered outdated: the photographer's head covered with a blanket, his feet blending with the tripod, everything requiring much preparation

before every click, and after it also the additional handling and the changing of the plate, and during all this time what is in front of the camera, a person or a landscape, is meant not to move. Something in this complicated practice – which is exposed, with acerbic sincerity, in the video work *Don't Move* (2014) [pp. 8-9, 126-127] – begins to connect with the specific situation of the subjects Amir has chosen to photograph: this sojourning, this lingering, this waiting without a focus, this time-killing, this limitation of movement. In the meantime I will emphasize only that this weighty and solemn action makes possible at least two matters fundamental to the entire project: passing the time with the photographed place and its inmates, and producing a photograph from a negative whose dimensions call for a large print, generous in every little detail.

These two – the large format's generosity of information, and the duration of time that work in such a format demands – underlie the surprise that the series of photographs before us brings us: the color photos that Amir has brought from Holot are devoid of people. There are no people in them and no distinct signs of incarceration or of limitation of freedom or of movement. Amir refrains from photographing the facility itself – with its fences, its gates, and its container-residences – and documents only its external surroundings. Yet the human presence in these "empty" photos is most palpable, and they easily elude being associated with the genre of "landscape photography". In them we see desert spots, segments of dry earth with a tree or a bush or a mound of stones, and in all of them there are signs of activity that occurred yesterday evening and is likely to continue tomorrow. Amir photographs during the time the refugees are imprisoned in the compound, and for this reason the limited time to be allotted for this slow photographing turns into a focus of tension. He photographs outside, so that the space "around Holot" becomes the very core of the project, an apt basis for constructing a contemporary critique

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on the situation of human freedom in this country (this country, by the way, doesn't look so familiar and local in these "exterior" photos of Holot).

In one of the large photos an acacia tree bursts out of the naked desert ground [p. 64]. Its top fills the upper third of the frame, as though pouring out and continuing the movement of the bent branches, and the slender trunk looks as if it won't withstand the weight of the foliage, into which blankets, mats, a pillow, plastic bags and a bunch of dried sweet-corn cobs have been meticulously inserted. There has been a social occurrence here, and it is now in a state of waiting. This is Anwar's tree. Anwar arrived on foot from Sudan and has been in Holot for almost a year now. In the daytime the tree protects him from the sun, and at nighttime it protects his folded belongings from the desert winds, or from moisture. In the photo there is also a glimpse of a pipe, a hint of the irrigation system in this field, which belongs to a farmer from Kadesh-Barnea who permits Anwar to use water that leaks from the pipe for cooking of for growing vegetables in the shade beneath the tree. The tree is important, and Anwar ornaments its base with a circle of empty water bottles buried in the ground up to their necks. Perhaps these repel pests, perhaps not, but the white caps of these plastic bottles don't move from here, and they mark this place – the shade area of this particular acacia tree – as someone's place, for an indefinite period.

In these frozen photos there is not even a hint of the personal involvement that marked Amir's continuing activity with previous communities he photographed. On the contrary: here Amir makes sure there is a constant incongruity between his experience in the field (his ongoing communication with the people he photographs, whether in Holot or after their release) and the images he creates, particularly because his activity in the field is not explicitly defined. The disparity between what we see and the thought of "involvement" (in the photos we don't sense the camera's dynamic entry into the arena of any event) makes it difficult for us to

clearly label "The Situation of the Asylum Seekers in Holot" as the photo's subject, and Amir's Holot photography as a force striving for or contributing to a change of the situation. With these mute pictures, in which there is more bewonderment than position-taking, the possibility arises that the photographed event is not that of the refugees but that of the artist, of his standing there, then, with no-one around, taking the photograph for a reason that cannot be clearly articulated.

In another photo, of a yellowish plain spotted with low bushes, the bushes don't look dry, perhaps because it's winter, and dull opaque clouds hang down from above, flat – as this kind of photographic format (broad, eliminating perspectives) permits [p. 57]. The details everywhere are seen only in a form that is egalitarian, that has equanimity. The central interest that this photo offers – a kind of square black hole in its lower part – also wears a kind of dullness, a marginality. Amir excels in showing this marginality as something that is hard to look at – and not because it's shocking, but the opposite: because it's so boring. The black hole is a stove, built of materials found in the area, a little cement from here and mud from the sand there, with an opening at the top for smoke and a seating area cleared of stones in front of it. People cook there every day, because the food they're given at the facility is either inedible or insufficient, and some even earn some money from their cooking, a few shekels a plate. This hole, which has become a source of nutrition and a gathering spot, refuses to function as a vanishing point or even as something that possesses volume. Amir makes sure that this stove will function as no more than a sign, as a basic form that is foreign, not from here.

In another photo, forms like these are storage pits in the sand – but here there is something the camera wants to point at, not to only dissolve its importance in relation to the landscape around it [p. 87]. The forms the camera points at – square-square-circle, or circle-square-square – they too

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have lost their volume and it's hard to imagine how deep they are, especially when the central form looks more like a thin strip of plywood than like a cover of a deep pit. Inside these pits the refugees store utensils and foods that they couldn't bring into the facility after the appointed hour. So the pits are covered, and sometimes padlocked, and stones or a dry bush and a stick laid on the ground will serve as a sign. Taking the time to linger and look at this photograph rewards us by exposing details that only this kind of photographic format makes possible, and these details are essential for leaving our reading open to additional interpretations. Into this frame Amir introduces yet another pale square, far off to the right, beside a blanket, with a pipe on the other side, and in the foreground some tracks or other shapes in the sand, and it's no longer possible to assume that these sticks have simply flown here with the wind: two crosses at the bottom of the frame have been evidently placed there by someone who finds some purpose in their being there. Thus the photographer and the people he photographs become closer to one another in the way they relate to the landscape as a space in which everything can be a sign of something, something that has been placed, a landscape that is made up of terms, rather than of what has simply grown there or was always-already there.

Forms like these in the open space outside the fences of the Holot compound are not pictured in Amir's work only as comments on the survivalist improvisation of the people who live outside our field of vision. What are these signs in the landscape? This question already assumes a clear distinction between functionality (a storage pit) and non-functionality (bottle-tops around a tree-trunk) – a distinction that is difficult to support when speaking about a culture that is so foreign. As I write these lines, for example, an installation by the artist Georges Adéagbo from Benin in West Africa – a long way from Sudan and Eritrea – is on display at the Israel Museum. There too, many objects have been placed, in what to me looks like a totally non-functional and

meaningless arrangement, but the exhibition teaches us that the artist relates to all the items in the space through their inner powers or the ancient souls held within their color, their shape, or their weight, or their smell. Without knowing, I assume that something of all this has perhaps come across to here too, to the white stones arranged to form an oblong on a strip of dry ground, at a distance of about twenty meters from the entrance to the turkey coops of Kadesh-Barnea. In another photograph the pale stones are arranged as a large closed square, and about these Amir was told "Here we made a mosque" [pp. 75-76].

Nonetheless, quite a number of the temporary structures visible in the photographs have a distinct function – the function of a waiting space. To wait and to wait until the day passes, one needs a long plank with two bases, and shade. The large cans of Nido concentrated powdered milk, which are brought here by Bedouin merchants, can be filled (after use) with sand, and sealed, and attached to a rod and used for weight-lifting, or without the rod as seats under a tree, or as bases for a bench [p. 67]. The waiting, then, is the subject that Amir is tracing here, on the assumption that it is reflected by the surroundings and the signs that have been left in them. Every spot of shade that Amir photographs here therefore becomes a place, a space for sojourning of someone who prepared this shady spot for himself to spend time in, while the assumption that the things we see in the photographed space are natural is always to be suspected. With this suspicion about the naturalness of these things, I learn that Anwar's tree, too, is of a species of blue acacia (*Acacia saligna*) that environmental scientists dub an "invader", and that government resources are being invested in eliminating it from this country.

The video works included in the *Doing Time in Holot* project broaden the focus on the subject of "waiting" in the photographs. The work *Don't Move* mentioned above shows the complications involved in an old-fashioned photography session

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such as this in the surroundings of the detention facility: after all the artist's attempts and instructions and changings of plates in the camera, and after all the time that passes, in the presentation before us we see nothing except the video that documents all this. As noted earlier, the entire series doesn't include photos of people, and our expectations of seeing what came out of Amir's encounter with the group of asylum seekers he photographs on the white automobile in the arid plain end in disappointment, which only complements the disappointment of our expectations that something will happen at the end of the video. The time it takes Amir to photograph the group before him competes with the time of the sunlight, which enables the two actions to take place – Amir's action, and the action of the video camera that documents it. The day descends, the light darkens, Amir and the people he is photographing have to leave the place, but until that happens, these people are asked not to move: i.e., to turn their nightmarish sojourn in the facility into a show of sojourning. This is not a document about the situation of the asylum seekers in the Holot facility – it is a deconstruction of everything that such a report is expected to contain. With numerous efforts, some that may almost arouse ridicule, Amir shapes a scene that doesn't obey his instructions. They keep moving all the time, the sun sinks, they laugh, go into and out of the car or the frame, and in the end nothing of all this gets into the project or into the exhibition.

Still, this work, which contains photography of photography, or documentation of an artistic action that itself becomes an artistic action, organizes landscape. It is not only the incessantly working video camera that documents Amir photographing the group on the automobile: the people in that group too are photographing him, and each other, on their cell phones. This socially-involved documentary photography thus mixes with Conceptual Art (of the '60s and '70s kind), which focuses the meaning of art on the concept, i.e., the idea on which the work is based, and not

its actual existence in the world. This is of course not a documentation of a Performance or a Happening: neither Amir nor the refugees who appear in front of him perform any radical action that might subvert the usual meanings of everyday activity. But precisely because the work *Don't Move* proposes a sincere and undramatic conjunction of the object of Amir's gaze (the detainees in Holot and the circumstances of their life) and the object of our gaze (Amir himself and his art), we attain the ability to see the moral, artistic and political limitations of involved documentary photography. We become aware of the limitations of commentaries that relate to work such as Amir's while classifying it as an already-known genre within the discipline of photography alone.

In the video work *Mollo and Efreim* (2015) [pp. 4-5, 128-129], Amir continues to examine and to stimulate his attitude to sojourning. This is not some wordplay on the trite term "illegal sojourners" (such as those Amir has worked with in the past, as noted above). It is a call to exercise our own, present, attitude, as viewers at an exhibition, to our own time, the time we spend at the exhibition, the time we're willing to spend there, the time we're accustomed to spend facing photographed images in the present period. We see a pair of youngsters sitting on a dirt track, talking. The camera is a long way from them and does not pick up their conversation, and they, for their part, do not let us decide if they're aware of its existence or not. The video is not manipulated or edited, it's simply too long. Twenty or more minutes watching one wall in a space for showing art – that's a very very long time, even for watching a narrative work, seductive as it may be. In this work, simply nothing happens, and it's longer than can be expected of the viewers' patience, which as we know derives from the convention of narrative representation in which something happens that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Even what does finally happen here, after a very long time, can't with any certainty be called an "occurrence". Mollo and

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Efreim sit there and talk – and then... they get up and go.

Lingering, or sojourning, is thus positioned at the center of this project, as a basis for examining the limits of photography in its continuous seeping between documentation and concept or idea. Our capacity to contemplate and to understand the circumstances of the asylum seekers' lives in the Holot facility depends on a change in the conventions of artistic representation and of the viewing of art, conventions that on the face of it seem to have nothing to do with issues such as migration, globalization or the collapse of the political frameworks of the nation-state. But if we agree to sit opposite Amir's large-scale photographs, to look deeper into their many details or to share this prolonged contemplation of them with other views, and if during a prolonged sitting opposite a large color photograph it very slowly convinces us of its delicate beauty or the extent to which it is meaningless to us; and if we're willing to sit watching a long video work waiting for something to happen in it, while in the course of watching we not infrequently have feelings of wasting time, frustration, slight anger at ourselves, at the artist, and at the museum – if all these things happen to us opposite these images that contain and conceal real suffering that is reinforced an hour and a half's drive from here, then, perhaps, it will become clear to us that our political consciousness (what is happening around us, what brought us here) depends on the way we behave with images (to photograph quickly, to see quickly). Materials such as Amir's in fact reactivate their display space – the museum, the "white cube" – not as a building that contains images and objects that are not connected to its form or its current definition, but as a place that simultaneously makes perceptible both what is in it and what it represents, in other words, as a performative space.

The project *Doing Time in Holot* is not site-specific work, but its display inside "sojourning facilities" that engage in the

consumption of art and culture reactivates the connection between the criticism of museums (the current page in the chronicles of Western art) and the criticism of Western imperialism. On the other hand, a prolonged sitting opposite Amir's works does not mean one is taking part in the uptodate trend of participatory viewing or of the activation of viewers as a curatorial machine; if there is a distinct action that is expected of us here, it is definitely a non-action, in the sense of sitting and seeing instead of running south to do something. Here lies the most interesting paradox in Amir's work, as work of photography that brings its viewers to an act-of-sojourning and rewards them with more and more details and more and more feelings and thoughts about the concept of sojourning – and at the same time marks the situation of the viewers as analogous to the situation of the photographed community, and does so without creating an identity between these two situations.

The viewers of Amir's work are not identical to the people he photographs, but more than once there are hints in it of unusual changes of roles. In the video work *Butra* (2015) [pp. 6-7], Butra from Sudan is photographed under one of those acacia trees, holding in his hands some small prints of Amir's photographs that are on display in the exhibition. Butra explains to us, in broken Hebrew, about each of the areas documented in the photographs, without moving his gaze from the camera: Here we meet in the morning; here we get ready for lunch; here we spend the evening hours; etc., etc. – once again, photography that is a comment on another act of photography, this time not really documentation of another artistic action. But something in this entire action deviates from the divisions into genres and even into mediums, as Tamar Getter perceived about this way in which Amir works:

He always knows and is aware of the fact that, even when it [his stance as a photographer who is totally involved in the lives of the community he is photographing]

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is personally reliable, the political situation and the social status differences between the photographer and his subjects cannot be erased, and are determined and enforced by the public, the political and historical place independent of the situation and the emotional capabilities of both sides participating in producing the photographs [...] But the situation is even more delicate and fragile: Amir does not ingratiate himself; he shares nothing of his consciousness of the image or the structure of his artistic thinking with the photographed people. These different consciousnesses do not meet; at the most they may chance to meet, perhaps.⁸

Far from the standard experience of viewing in a museum, the photographs that Amir created with a quick digital camera have been distributed among the asylum seekers in Holot, as part of the ongoing exchanges he always conducts in the communities he works among. This quasi-touristic genre of photography places Amir as a foreigner among his hosts: for example, a group of Africans gathering around a billiard table in the heart of a desert landscape; or another group standing assertively in a thin garden-bed of sweet-corn; and another group, this time of Africans and Asians, in a documentation of an encounter that came about due to global circumstances (the Asians are Thai agricultural workers from settlements in the region who are assisting the Sudanese in growing vegetables around the Holot facility). These postcards are free of "composition" and therefore also of the art arena as a whole (the artist hasn't signed them, and the number of prints is not limited), and in this way they reactivate photography's most revolutionary and essential potentiality in the art field: to be non-art.

Beyond the many uses that Amir makes of his cameras in the *Doing Time in Holot* project, his complex art action is not bounded by the medium's boundaries, and constitutes yet another

reason for weighing once again the relevance of reading practices in contemporary art on the basis of medial means. Medial divisions are still commonplace in the art field, both in the museum and in the academy, despite the bursting of boundaries between painting, sculpture, photography, text and design of space throughout the 20th century and even more decisively with the burgeoning of Conceptual Art and its ramifications for art as a whole since the 1960s. The dissolution of these divisions is accelerating even more today with the endless capacities of replication available to us, and as a result of the use of the image as a communications unit for constant distribution more than as a basis for creating art that is frameable.

Anwar, the asylum seeker under whose acacia tree some important insights in Amir's project have crystallized, was released from the Holot facility on June 16, 2016. Now he sends pictures on WhatsApp to Amir from his place of work in a glass factory in Netivot: Anwar beside a machine, or hugging another worker in the factory – a renewed encounter after a year of absence. Nothing in these passing digital images has any public importance or artistic interest, as long as we see them simply as photographs, and not as additional links in Amir's continuing involvement, which is, itself, his artistic medium: artistic practice that blends life and art, which is constantly bound up with the place of photography in his life and in the life of the milieu he has chosen to become involved in.

Ron Amir, Involved in Photography

1. This is the view of several critics (who have quite different approaches), such as Allan Sekula and Jacques Rancière. Sekula, for example, argues that "Photographers are reinventing themselves in various ways: as neo-pictorialist pompiers, as quasijournalist impresarios, as melancholy archivists, as the antiquarian restorationists of obsolete instrumental practices such as the composite photograph and the motion study. In short, they seek to join the company of 'real artists' who work 'with' photographs. I'm not discounting the fact that interesting and compelling work has resulted from these shifts, nor am I nostalgic for the pursuit of some 'pure' essence of photography. What disturbs me is the ambition implicit in much of this work, the ambition to 'transcend,' to 'gain higher ground,' in an art world in which semiotic status and market value are closely correlated." Allan Sekula, "Issues and Commentary: Some American Notes," *Art in America* (February 1990). See also: Jacques Rancière, "Notes on the Photographic Image," *Radical Philosophy*, 3 (2009).
2. The coining of the term "documentary" is attributed to the Scottish filmmaker John Grierson, who almost a hundred years ago identified this kind of photography with an educational mission that touches on the (troubled and troubling) human condition in the modern period; but the term "direct" photography was used decades earlier than this for raising political questions and disseminating them in public. Suffice it to note one example, an especially early one, from the Israel Museum's photography collections. Already in 1876–1877, the Scottish photographer John Thomson (together with the radical journalist Adolphe Smith), published the weekly *Street Life in London*, which contained photographs of the everyday life of the lower classes in England, accompanied by talks with the photographed subjects or brief biographical surveys. Thomson's humanistic works had a far-reaching influence on the development of social photography, and later also of photo-journalism. Characteristic of them is the focus on the human subjects, the emphasis on their limited movement in the urban space, and the importance of their facial expressions as a means of arousing identification in the viewer. See: Brett Abbot, *Engaged Observers: Documentary Photography since the Sixties* (Los Angeles: Paul Getty Museum, 2010), p. 15.
3. David Campny, "Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on the Problems of 'Late Photography,'" in: David Green (ed.), *Where Is the Photograph?* (Brighton: Photoworks /Photoforum, 2003).
4. This argument does not relate to historical exhibitions of social photography or of photographic works that have been attributed (by art historians) to the documentary genre – exhibitions that position their subjects in a context of knowledge disciplines (history of photography, history of art), but not in the contexts of the documented historical events, and certainly not in any connection to the relevance of these events to our times.
5. Doron Rabina, "Barzach", in *Ron Amir: Jisr al-Zarqa, Back-and-Forth*, exh. cat. (Haifa: Haifa Museum of Art, 2014), p. 143.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
7. Tamar Getter, "The Photographs of Ron Amir", an unpublished text from June 2007.
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