

## Spreading Wide the Fan of Time within the Confines of the Village

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### Presence and Absence

Ron Amir's photography project in Jisr al-Zarqa is shaped by the structure, forms, and life of the village. Jisr, as it is referred to by local residents, who also call it simply "the village,"<sup>1</sup> has a chaotic, improvised quality to it, so that visitors have difficulty making their way through its crowded spaces. Only in late 2009, for the first time in its history, did the Ministry of the Interior set out to draft a master plan for the village, which addresses the need for, and the possibility of, enlarging its area of jurisdiction.

Jisr al-Zarqa lacks a municipal grid plan. It contains few roads that can be described as main streets, and only a small number of public buildings that may facilitate one's orientation in space. Its overall appearance is marked by the absence of a superimposed spatial order, of repetition, or of seriality. The houses, streets, and organization of both the public and private spheres in Jisr al-Zarqa visibly lack a characteristic typology. The serial, ordered, typological photography of the kind pioneered by Hilla and Bernd Becher is thus irrelevant to this environment. Every element in the landscape exists in its own right, and nothing repeats itself – save perhaps for the portrait of the *mukhtar* (the head of the village) (p. 24), which hangs in many of the village houses, appearing repeatedly in the background of Amir's photographs. Amir's images of houses, buildings, and various environments serve instead to enhance their singularity. The only order visible in these photographs is the one imposed by Amir himself, who intentionally captures unplanned arrangements. Such is the case, for instance, in *House* (p. 59), which features a building

detached from its immediate, unbuilt environment, while bearing no resemblance to the houses in the background. This house is an exemplar of improvisation. The colorful wooden boards that block its windows, if only temporarily, add another, amusing visual accent that highlights its anomalous quality.

In *Council Zone* (2002), one of the early works created for this project, Amir photographed an advertising billboard in the parking lot of the municipal building (p. 49). The large blue-and-white surface, which echoes the sky above, features nothing but randomly situated black plus and minus ( + - ) signs that appear to be the remnants of an old advertisement – ironic symbols of a process that does not add up to anything. An advertisement for nothing.

What Amir set out to discover in Jisr al-Zarqa, however, is what lies behind the empty sign, the empty billboard. What he found beyond this absence was something that does clearly exist in Jisr al-Zarqa, determining its spatial character – the borders of the village. It is these borders that define the framework of this project.

### The Framework

Ron Amir has been taking pictures in Jisr al-Zarqa for close to twelve years. He has visited the village hundreds of times, at every possible time of day and season of the year. He has entered every neighborhood and area, and has taken pictures in numerous houses, businesses, and public buildings into which he was invited as a guest. He has been asked to photograph family events and has visited on many holidays; more than anything,

however, he captures the time and space of everyday life. No other Israeli photographer has spent such a prolonged period of time and taken so many pictures in a single place. In Amir's case, however, Jisr al-Zarqa is the exclusive arena in which the project unfolds. Its residents are the subjects of numerous works and sub-series, yet Amir has never left the village with them. Over time, he considered accompanying residents to their workplaces, most notably in the service industries of Haifa and the Tel Aviv metropolitan area, or on their visits to various shopping and entertainment centers. Ultimately, however, he decided to photograph them solely in the village, which is clearly circumscribed by its borders: from the sea in the west to the coastal highway, Road No. 2, in the east; from the separation wall running between Jisr al-Zarqa and its wealthy neighbor Caesarea to the south, to the Tananim Stream and the fish ponds of Kibbutz Maagan Michael in the north.

The village's borders thus serve as the frame within which Amir has photographed-created-represented-distilled the world of Jisr al-Zarqa. Despite the incredible number of photographs, the numerous series, and the attention to a wide range of subjects, the limitation that Amir imposed upon himself enables one to view this entire project as a single, crowded network of images that are each significant in their own right, while serving as links or intersections within "the large picture."

West: The Beach and the Sea

Amir first arrived in Jisr al-Zarqa in 1996: during his time off from work as a handyman on Kibbutz Maagan Michael, he walked along the shoreline and stopped at the village's small fishing harbor.<sup>2</sup> Six years later, he photographed the first series, *Families on the Beach* (pp. 50, 51, 53, 55). He had yet to realize that this series would evolve into a vast project, while serving also as the basis for the creation of a rich and meaningful relationship

with the village and many of its residents. Even this early series, however, makes visible what would later become one of the signature elements of his photographic portraits: the tension between the precise, carefully staged aspects of the photograph and the registration, or perhaps even summoning of, the contingent, the quotidian, the arbitrary. The photographed family prepares itself for a group portrait, while behind it and to its sides life goes on. The family members collaborate on staging the group's pose, yet the appearance of the overall scene is managed by Amir, who does not "clean" the margins of the frame, but rather leaves in the details that make them appear dynamic and full of life.

The sea continued to appear in Amir's photographs. In 2003, he went back to taking pictures in the fishermen's harbor (pp. 56, 130) – capturing a continuum of micro-events taking place in the same site; in the diptych *Harbor*, they loom into a cinematic moment that invites us to focus on the minor changes in the composition and on the range of activities unfolding against a backdrop composed of numerous shades of blue. The sea, it turns out, is not the same sea. And the photograph is what enables us or demands of us to pay attention to the differences, the changes, to time itself.

Like many of the residents of Jisr al-Zarqa, Amir carries the sea and its signs into other spaces within this project. The bounty of the sea (*Dessert*, p. 104) and signs attesting to related activities and hobbies decorate the fishermen's shacks (*At Hamdan's, At Khalil's*, pp. 80-81). They are also visible on the interior of the village, for instance in the home of Khaled (*On the Shore of the Sea of Galilee*, p. 109); although he has long stopped making a living from the sea, the water and the beach remain Khaled's true home even in the room he inhabits deep within the village. Boat models, carved and stuffed fish, mobiles made of weights and starfish, and a fossil found on the bottom of the sea all serve to decorate the room, whose center is occupied by piles of fishing nets waiting

for weights and floats to be sewn onto them. Other elements representative of Khaled's world appear among or within the nets: a small model of the Al-Aqsa Mosque alongside a cheap reproduction of a landscape painting (the Israeli painter Reuven Rubin's canonical *On the Road to Tiberias*); hunting trophies sidle up to a poster by Klimt and a "neo-Surrealist" painting; musical instruments are scattered throughout the room; a stone sculpture, which appears to belong to the tradition of Israeli-Canaanite art, stands on a low table alongside a figurine of a Christian saint and above a plastic toy gun. Like the nets sewn on its interior, Khaled's world is a complex, chaotic weave composed of numerous elements.

The sea, however, does not end there. It proudly reappears, framed, on the wall in the room inhabited by Malek (p. 132), as a sailboat tattooed onto Rashid's back (p. 113), as well as in a colorful local offering (p. 104). The sea is there as a space of leisure and relaxation, a place to enjoy hobbies, and the source of a meager living, as well as of hope. This is the sea that the residents of Jisr al-Zarqa refused to be torn away from, to leave, to flee, to be exiled from in 1948. And so, by clinging to the beautiful bay, they have remained the residents of the only Arab village on the Israeli coast. This village and its bay resemble neither the kind of exclusive beachside community found in Arsuf, nor the bay in Atlit, which is off limits to the public, nor the marinas of Herzliya or Ashkelon, nor the recently redone seaside promenade in Tel Aviv. For the residents of Jisr al-Zarqa, the sea is not simply a border; it is also, above all, a horizon.

North: The Stream, Day and Night

Two of the dominant characteristics of Amir's photographs are evident in the series he created in 2006 on the village's other natural border – the Tananim Stream to its north, which serves as a pastoral meeting point for village youth. In the daytime

photographs included in the group of works *Barzakh*, Amir ignores the convention of capturing "the decisive moment." He foregoes the *dictum* associated with the photography of Cartier-Bresson – the command to search for the temporal vanishing point that defines an event, the point at which the scene coheres and photographic magic is born and disappears. Instead, Amir insists on examining the banal, continuous present of everyday life. Such moments contain no visual puns, surprises, parodies, shocks, sensations, or comic relief. They are not shaped by a voyeuristic gaze that captures the other in order to underscore difference or search for anomalies. Amir makes a point of not highlighting the difficult socio-economic aspects of life in the village. He does not conceal or ignore them, yet refuses to focus on them. He is not beholden to the conventions of journalistic reporting, to the "truth" as captured by the media, or to the conventions of classical documentary photography. Poverty, like other local and personal problems, is presented as just one, relatively marginal aspect of a multilayered, complex, rich existence.

Amir positions himself in one of the poorest places in Israel, vis-à-vis people whose existence and visibility are usually ignored – while seeing and presenting them in quotidian, unsensational or anti-sensational situations. Young men fish or bathe in a stream. Nothing happens. Yet if we carefully observe this seemingly boring moment, which is captured in the photograph *Bonfire* (p. 95), we will notice that one of the young men is wearing an IDF uniform. The only discordant note in this scene is the attempt not to stand out in the context of Israeli society by adopting one of its most familiar signs of normalization. Like many other photographs by Amir, this work may be described as a frame without a center, which contains no dominant action or figure; a moment that does not arrest time, but rather enables us to linger and focus on what eludes the eye.

The evening and nighttime photographs in the same series (pp. 99, 101) reveal another fundamental aspect of Amir's work: his is a participatory, collaborative form of photography situated between the two basic poles of photographic practice: staged photography and various types of documentation. The documented site, in this particular image, is a meeting place regularly frequented by the members of this group. They are engaged in what are, for them, familiar, routine actions – keeping warm by the light of the fire, talking, sharing a meal and using a pitchfork to gather up the leftovers and burn them. Amir appears to be simply documenting these moments. At the same time, it is obvious that he is also directing and shaping their aesthetic appearance. His subjects make suggestions and he arranges the composition; they correct him and he changes it; they do something and he asks them to move slightly or pause momentarily. There is no decisive moment captured in a split second by the gaze of the documenting photographer, nor is there an invented scene. Rather, there is a process of collaboration on the production of the photograph. As Doron Rabina notes in his essay for this catalogue, this process may be associated with a single, simple word: friendship. Amir will not ask his subjects to do anything that is not "them" and which does not partake of their world; they, in turn, feel quite at ease to demand changes or to refuse. The result is the fruit of the encounter between Amir's technical abilities, knowledge, aesthetic choices, and artistic intuitions and the subjects' willingness to take part in a process that calls attention to, and reflects, their own lives. This mode of action is the inverse of the strategy evident, for instance, in the works of the Canadian photographer Jeff Wall, whose staged scenes echo a possible reality. Amir, by contrast, begins with reality, examines the possibility of introducing minor changes into it, and then shapes it (oftentimes in collaboration with his subjects) into a photographic situation defined by the tension between documentation and staging.<sup>3</sup>

#### South and East: The Road and What Lies Beyond

Prior to 2002, Jisr al-Zarqa had no real border on its southern side. At that time, the Caesarea Foundation Company decided to separate one of the richest towns in Israel from its neighbor to the north, which is home to one of the country's poorest populations. A massive dirt rampart was erected between Caesarea and Jisr. For several years, it was watched over by guards and a patrol vehicle. The passage of time and the changing weather conditions gradually led to the partial collapse of the rampart, which today is no longer patrolled; this manmade border, which is gradually being eroded, stands as a monument to the relations of resentment, jealousy, and suspicion between neighbors. In 2002, 2006, and 2008, Amir repeatedly created panoramas of Jisr al-Zarqa and of the wall (pp. 78-79), which capture the complex relationship between two populations through a spatial prism. Amir's choice of the "wide angle" genre presents this situation in no uncertain terms. The rampart is built, towers over the landscape, and then falls apart. Jisr al-Zarqa continues to expand southward.

To the east, Jisr al-Zarqa is similarly bordered by a manmade barrier: the coastal Road No. 2, one of Israel's main highways. Since nature (the sea, a stream, and a nature reserve) border the village to the west and north, while a municipal border runs along its southern side, the residents' gaze turns eastward – as delineated by Amir in the 2004 series *Inside Out* (pp. 71-75). The east also represents their historical origin: in the mid-nineteenth century, their ancestors settled on the outskirts of the Kabara swamps. Today this area is agricultural land owned by Beit Hanania and Kibbutz Maagan Michael, on the other side of the busy highway. The photographs in this series – which were all taken from within the village – capture the expanse of land that various committees have

designated, over the years, as a possible option for solving the village's space problem. The photographs in this series underscore the imprisonment of the village within its clearly defined confines, as well as the indifference of time. The residents go about their daily routines; traffic flows; and the cows graze in the fields that once belonged to Jisr al-Zarqa, and which now could – yet do not – provide the solution for sorely needed land. The focus on the quotidian and banal charges this series with a political dimension. Such a sense of calm, and nothing is being done.<sup>4</sup>

#### One Against Many

*Jisr al-Zarqa, Back-and-Forth* evolves between opposing, contrasting poles. Such a long-term, wide-ranging project gives rise to a carefully selected group of photographs, yet is also strikingly inclusive in terms of its extent and depth. One of principles that define the three exhibitions summing up Amir's photographic project in Jisr al-Zarqa is the attempt to highlight not only the single, aesthetic, framed photograph, but also the photographic multiplicity, the changes wrought by the passage of time, the missed opportunities, the unique lack of organization. To this end, Amir created the last work included in this project – *By the Way*, a video installation on display at the Israeli Center for Digital Art in Holon. Although this work itself is based on a selection process that involved refinement and structuring, it was undertaken using a different tool – a simple digital camera that Amir always keeps in his car for this very purpose. The production of these images stems from a different motivation; they function as a sort of supplemental presence, a form of excess composed of a wide range of traditions, themes, subjects, and forms. This installation, which complements the project undertaken in Jisr al-Zarqa, presents a fundamental aspect of Amir's work. It

was born of Amir's willingness to also serve as a "professional photographer" documenting events in the village – ranging from weddings, celebrations, and chance gatherings to the documentation of damage for assessment purposes, of fishing boats preparing for their annual licensing test, or of a damaged net photographed in closeup. These photographs were not intended "for the gallery," yet we have chosen nevertheless to display them. From Amir's point of view, they represent a form of "community service" that unfolds parallel to his artistically motivated activities; and while each of these practices has its own purpose and aim, they support and nourish one another. This installation offers an additional reading of the project as a whole; one that reveals how the photographer, the photographed site, and the subjects come to exist together in a manner that is neither hierarchical nor chronological. They form a fan composed of images of people, places, events, and objects that is spread out in time and space, in the realms of memory and oblivion, at once concealing and revealing what exists close by, just a few meters from the margins of the road.

1 Jisr al-Zarqa has the status of a local municipality. Today, about 14,000 people reside in the village. This number is significant, since the law stipulates that a municipality with 15,000 or more residents must be provided with access by means of a direct exit from the highway. At present, entering Jisr al-Zarqa requires a long detour on Road No. 4 (the old coastal road), and involves passing through a tunnel of sorts running under Road No. 2 or along a narrow bridge. This state of affairs is expected to change in the coming years.

2 I gathered the information concerning Ron Amir's biography and his work in Jisr al-Zarqa, as well as the statements quoted in this article, during the dozens of hours we spent together in his studio, driving to Jisr al-Zarqa, Haifa, and Holon, and exchanging written questions and answers in 2012–2013. Most of the statements quoted in this article were taken from his answers to questions I sent him by email.

3 A somewhat different process is made evident in the only work included in this exhibition which is not a still photograph: the video *The Tunnel* (p. 145). Amir was the one who invited a

group of children to go down with him into the subterranean tunnel that is part of an ancient Roman aqueduct, whose exposed parts are proudly showcased in the neighboring Beit Hanania and Caesarea. Despite the presence of the responsible adult who initiated this short excursion, Amir enables the children to lead, and to try and guess where they are or fantasize about it.

- 4 The regional committee recently approved the expropriation of agricultural land from Beit Hanania in order to divert the coastal road eastward and allow for the expansion of Jisr al-Zarqa. Nevertheless, this plan is still far from being realized. See, for instance, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/1.2055555>



**The Tunnel**, 2009, video, 11:30 min.

التفوق، 2009، فيديو، 11:30 دقيقة

המנוחה, 2009, וידיאו, 11:30 דק'