SLOWING DOWN, ZOOMING IN:
CONVERSATION WITH ORAIB TOUKAN

Kunstlicht (Aline Hernández & Steyn Bergs)
Oraib Toukan

Oraib Toukan's video *When Things Occur* (2016) examines the production, circulation, and reception of images of the Israeli attacks on Gaza in the summer of 2014. Consisting of Skype conversations with Gaza inhabitants who were differentially involved in the making of such images, the work raises questions concerning (self-)representation in the face of asymmetrical warfare and violence. It thus reflects on what it means to be turned by representation into a distant onlooker. A moving account of the mobility of images of war through digital media ecologies, *When Things Occur* is at the basis of the following conversation — conducted, appropriately, via Skype — with the artist.

Kunstlicht (Aline Hernández and Steyn Bergs): It seems to us that *When Things Occur* (fig. 1-3) draws attention to a certain ambivalence that characterizes mediation — animated as it always is by an interplay of distance and mutual *rapprochement*, of remoteness and contact. Your film is about mediation, particularly about photography, but also emphatically relies on it, as it consists of dialogues conducted over Skype. Could you perhaps comment on this aspect of the work? And more specifically, could you elaborate on the ways in which this interplay of distance and contact manifests? What are the political implications of this, when making a video about Palestine, and Gaza in particular, where people's mobility is forcefully restricted while images of the place proliferate and circulate at an ever-accelerating pace?

Oraib Toukan: That's a very interesting question, because it felt as though that was part of the frustrations of the Gaza-based image-makers I spoke to. Namely, the frustration of constantly being confronted with trying representations of one's home, since Gaza is a city past the seasonal reactionary representations of it. Global media flock to it only when there is a war and often forget its plight the morning after. It's a city in which the various participants of the film roam, live, smell, and know regardless of repetitive, cyclical Israeli onslaughts on it — just as you might relate to the place where you live because of the smell of your local bakery, or the taste of your morning coffee. I am oddly reminded here of how unhappy I was with the shade of blue skies in the test print of my book *Sundry Modernism: Material for a study of Palestinian Modernism* (2016), where I photographically explore the historical particularities of Modernist architecture in Palestine. At one point, I decided to bite the bullet and sit with a professional color corrector in Berlin. Our conversations and his responsiveness to my perception of a sky-blue I just *know* (and perhaps was longing for) was

↑Oraib Toukan, *When Things Occur* (still), 2016. Single-channel video (colour, sound); 28:00.

endearing. It's of course a perception, but nevertheless true to me. From the light at a certain time of the year where one lives, at that certain time of the day, depending of it's coastal or high altitude etc. The point is: it's a shade and a feeling true to one's everyday experience of a place.

To contextualize this further: we are having this conversation on Skype right now. We are indoors, and locked-down because of the Corona virus. This is an everyday experience in Gaza; from curfews to utmost isolation from the world; from blockades to border closures. Despite all this, and despite being overshadowed by pictures of death and destruction, Gaza is home to every one of these photographers, and nostalgically so (now that some have managed to leave it against all odds). That aside, an important concern right now in Palestine is how such a highly populated place, with a completely burnt-out health infrastructure because of repeated Israeli wars on it, is going to deal if Corona does infiltrate its increasingly impermeable borders.

But while I am stressing this actual and everyday relation to Gaza-as-home, in the film I was actually not trying to represent Gaza per se. On the contrary, I was trying to explore images of people living there that came out of the 2014 Israeli onslaught on it, in particular. Although at that time, I was living about 80 kilometers away from Gaza, I was consuming images of people suffering in the same way as you might have been, and that is, from a distance. A question that kept surfacing in my mind at the time was: what do I *do* with these pictures appearing on all my screens? Bearing in mind that within Palestine and Israel, distance has a different meaning; it is not only about physical space, but about the degree of separation between its various levels of injustices, between living a wholesome life and

living beside tragedy just a few kilometers away. Within Palestine, it is also about guilt: who is at the forefront of the occupation, and who has been spared from its front lines?

Secondly, I have long been interested in the materiality of photographic media. I mentioned *Sundry Modernism* just now, but in all my work I think there is a continuous 'modernist' search for some kind of self-reflexivity in relation to the medium used and the questions at stake. In the case of *When Things Occur*, I was deliberately constraining myself to the space of the desktop and to Skype; a process of navigating, excavating, and researching, which I wanted to make visible in a more participatory way. There were also practical military considerations, of course; I could not reach many of the people I wanted to speak to in Gaza in any other way. So even when someone was in Ramallah and the other in Gaza, we would have the conversation via Skype.

KL: This last point you mention seems to relate to your treatment of photographic images, which displays a similarly reflexive approach to, or investment in, the medium of photography. In *When Things Occur*, but in some of your other works as well, you zoom in and scan over photos in such a way as to expose the pixels that the photos are made up of. This recurring motif of the pixel, and how it functions in your work, is something we are curious to hear about. While you are showcasing the photographs' artificiality — which you also do very explicitly in the 'airbrushing' of blood stains from the face of the little girl in a photo editing programme — this is certainly not yet another deconstruction of the photographic medium aimed to question or problematize its implicit claim to an indexical and documentary relation to empirical reality. Due in part to the image makers' personal testimonies (which anchor the images, grounding them in the lived experiences you mentioned earlier), the work seems to us to retain, and indeed to foster, a kind of faith in photographic representation as a means of approaching the Palestinian struggle — and, indeed, other sites of injustice.

OT: There is, for me, a hope in representations: an admiration, an honouring, if you will, of two-dimensional iterations of something seen. For me, the form and shape of the pixel itself represents that two-dimensional picture frame in which we are trapped, and which we necessarily continue to see the world through (no matter the three-dimensional, navigational spaces we have now entered). The pixel, and the 90-degree meeting of the edges of the pixel, symbolizes the act of representation. More and more, I have been preoccupied by abstraction. One thing I keep coming back to from my religion classes in high school was being told that one of the 99 names of God in the Quran is the *musawer*: the image maker. Humanity has never ceased to make images, or to think about them — : the pixel as a form is this quintessential human quality to me. For better or worse. When I started to work by editing from within the seemingly claustrophobic space

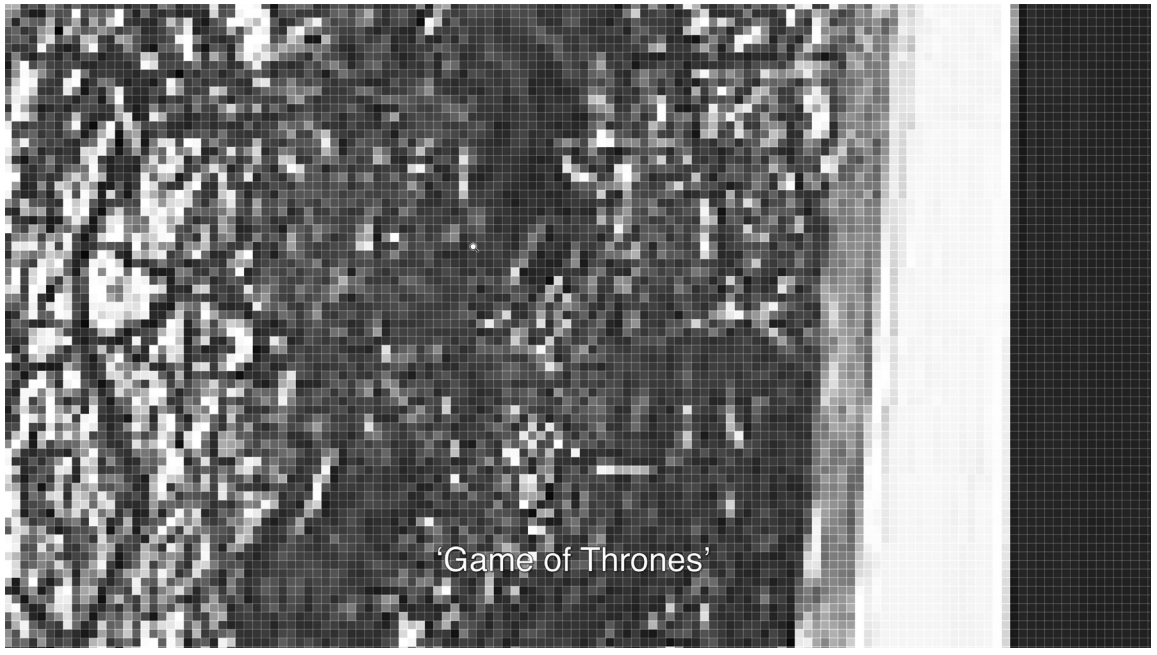
of the desktop, by panning across abstracted grids of pixels, people who saw my films would often tell me they did not quite know how to read those images or what it was they were even looking at. It's as though we are not comfortably literate or settled yet with abstraction. The impulse of the thinking brain is that it wants to know what it is that the eyes are looking at. Philosopher Reza Negarestani argues that there is cruelty behind thought's relation to abstraction. For me, the abstracted image is a moment of submission that we give into once we accept that something that was not known prior could become known. In other words, that something might be revealed after submission to what could be argued the aggression of abstraction.

What I feel happens in *When Things Occur* (and a few of my films) is that the viewer oscillates between trusting and distrusting my gaze as I tread images with my mouse. For example, in one sequence, a viewer might decipher that one is in fact looking at the tender face of an injured girl, until the mouse zooms further into her face, cuts to a demolished moon-shaped fan, and zooms out to a destroyed bedroom. Editing in these patterns, I attempt to make digital images more empathetic: it becomes not just about transmitting them, but also about slowing them down, and going deeper into their very raw crevices in such a way that we can actually stop to look, and painstakingly so. I often think of this process as a form of digital gazing, or scrolling up and down a Google image search and trying to see how these images move from site to site — from commemoration to commemoration — and how they get downsized, how they change, configure and reconfigure through social media. This political economy of images is something I am interested in. If you would follow a pack of cigarettes being smuggled between Turkey and Syria, that simple investigation would tell you all kinds of things about the economy of war, but also about war itself. Similarly, observing how certain photographs move and become moving was a way to research the political economy of images, and how empathy travels during war.

Finally, I feel the pixel offers me possibilities for exploring the materiality of a digital world in the same way images were revealed to me as a younger child when working with analogue photography. Specifically, my younger self in Jordan discovering photography in a darkroom at school and seeing images emerge, feeling like they are floating on the surface of a developer fluid, seeing that grain begin to appear on paper and watching latent images get drawn, is something I still look for: the way in which images eventually reveal themselves to us. That, and of course looking at family photographs as a child, and trying to make out a world that existed before myself. The physical handling, grappling, and holding of pictures is similar to gripping and diving into the pixel grain. This intimate, material relationship to photography is something that is guiding me.

KL: This notion of intimacy with and through media brings us back to the interplay of distance and contact, which we talked about earlier. It is

↑Oraib Toukan, *When Things Occur* (still), 2016. Single-channel video (colour, sound); 28:00.



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captured beautifully at the end of *When Things Occur,* when the faltering Skype connection interrupts the conversation, almost as a Brechtian distancing effect, and once more highlights the work's reliance on telecommunications — only for the conversation to be quickly resumed and open on to a shared moment of laughter.

OT: These moments are important, especially in light of all we have talked about here. Tanya Habjouqa, a photographer who works out of the West Bank, often pictures Palestinians exclusively in instances of laughter, normality, and mundanity; moments that amount to a celebration of life despite all. Palestinians have a strong sense of community, and so a great a sense of humor as a result, as well as a great sense of life and existence. Of course, these moments of laughter are just that: moments. There are also other moments — ; moments of devastation, and moments of struggle. In fact, in the conversation you are referring to, at the end of the video, I told the participant that I was really sorry, that I did not mean for the conversation to get so heavy that she felt she had to shut the phone on me. She burst out laughing and says something to the effect that I shouldn't overthink things too much: "there was simply an electricity outage, and we got cut, that's all". Laughter is an important part of a work for me. There has to be release somewhere.

KL: We also noticed that one concern shared by all of the image producers you spoke to revolved around the circulation and effects of photographs depicting graphic and violent scenes. Their concern stands in stark contrast with the apparent ease with which (western) media depict and represent

the war crimes committed in the Gaza Strip and other Palestinian territories. The seeming self-evidence with which scenes of destruction and death are reiterated betrays the presumption that such representations are needed to elicit interest or response from distant onlookers. In this context, the reluctance or refusal on behalf of the Palestinian image producers to spectacularize and exploit explicitly violent scenes raises pertinent questions about what we need to see, and how much of it we need to see, to be moved.

OT: One of several elements that *When Things Occur* tried to explore was this issue that you raise here — : how to 'elicit' interest. I tried to do that by presenting varying points of view in the different image-makers I spoke to. I was careful not to represent them as speaking in one voice, because they were not. They had widely diverging work experiences, from freelance photography to photographing for big agencies or driving around foreign photographers to capture images. This meant difference in income, class, and education across the board. One participant rightly argued, for example, that eliciting interest is simply a generational issue right now, and that the problem isn't necessarily restricted to Gaza alone. She brought up *Game of Thrones*. I was reminded of her comment just a few days ago, when I was watching someone watch *Batman*. I found myself thinking again about the obscenity of being unphased by violence. Anthropologist Michael Taussig, in *The Corn Wolf* (2015), mentions a kind of obscenity that feels as casual and normalized of an experience as eating a hamburger or drinking a Coca-Cola kind-of-thing. In other words, being so unphased by what one is seeing that it no longer makes a difference what is being seen. This is

precisely what another participant in the film was speaking of: becoming dulled by images of violence, an exhaustion almost, with images of oneself as violated. And yet another emphasized an economic, or 'job market' perspective on this is ; tthese images no longer bring income, because quite simply they will not be bought by western media outlets. One participant was less interested in who or what is in front of the camera and more invested in the camera lens as an emphatic instrument. More specifically, in the moment a local photographer finds their own demise in their own viewfinder. Because as a local photographer in Gaza, the reality is that you could potentially find yourself or the ones you love as the object in front of your lens at any given moment. For example: rushing to drive a foreign crew to cover the destruction of a neighbourhood after a raid, and finding your own house among that ruin.

KL: Between these different positions, it seems to us like there are still some commonalities to be discerned. Essentially, all are critical of the extremely graphic images that circulate in predominantly western media and are therefore invested in depicting or representing Palestine in ways that do not reduce the Palestinian people to the violence inflicted upon them.

OT: I wrote about this issue in an essay published not so long ago. There, I propose that there is another dimension to looking at these pictures, on an even deeper depth of field. Because, in the end, as the writer Sherene Seikaly argues, Palestine in general and Gaza in particular has become an archive of suffering. For me, Palestine has become a ubiquitous mass of images that *feels* like a pile that cannot be looked at anymore. Consider, for instance, how accustomed we have become to images of the Palestinian mother in grief: mourning over her loss, whether a house has been demolished, a son killed, or a daughter taken to prison. One of the photographers I spoke to in *When Things Occur* wonders about what it means to be in this position: ripping one's scarf off in complete desperation, anger, and grief in front of the camera. I would never want my own mother to be photographed in that state, he says, so I would also never frame another woman in this situation either. But nonetheless, the fact is that these images are there, and that the women in these images are saying something. Developing new modalities of looking, both in theory and in practice, therefore becomes important. The decision to stop, or scroll down, or pay closer attention, is determined by many factors. In my work I explore what the various elements at play are, and how they act out. I do this by slowing down, zooming in, and materially examining pictures that for me are begging to be looked at. They are particular images about very particular sites of injustice, where within each frame there is a different hierarchy of rights and sights at play.

KL: Here we can conclude with the potential of the image to offer a humane insight — looking as in having *regard* or *respect* — but also to the question of what that might mean, and if it is at all possible, in dehumanizing conditions.

OT: I believe this has to do with seeing oneself in a picture, not of oneself. In other words, it is not only about seeing the other, but also about realizing that it could just as well be you in that picture. If it is not you, then it really is your friend or your friend of a friend. Because the issue of 'distance' today is very different from when Susan Sontag, for example, was writing. Terms have changed: compassion now comes, for better or for worse, from realizing it could be you in that frame—which is also to say, it could be me, it could be my daughter, my father, and so forth. Incidentally, this resonates in some ways with Edmund Burke's notions of the sublime, in the sense that the sublime is about a *perception* of potential pain. It is about entertaining the *possibility* of pain, or of one's destruction even, and imagining from that point of place. Precisely because it excites and awakens the faculty of pain, it makes possible alternative ways of looking.

Oraib Toukan is an artist and Clarendon Scholar at the Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford. She is author of the book *Sundry Modernism: Materials for a Study of Palestinian Modernism* (Sternberg Press, 2016), and the film *When Things Occur* (2016).

Aline Hernández is a recipient of the Foundation Jumex Arte Cotemporáneo bursary, currently pursuing a master at Utrecht University in Media, Arts, and Performance Studies with a specialization in Gender Studies. She works as an independent researcher, translator, and curator. Since 2017, she is part of the editorial board of *Kunstlicht*.

Steyn Bergs is an art critic and a researcher in art history. His work operates at the intersections of contemporary art, (new) media art, political economy, critical theory, media theory, and aesthetics. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, researching how digital reproducibility has affected the commodification of contemporary art. From 2016 to 2018, together with Rosa te Velde, he was co-editor-in-chief of *Kunstlicht*.