

**Photographs, like a sort of embodied,
physical subconscious**

Mitra Abbaspour in conversation
with Dor Guez

Mitra Abbaspour: Let's begin at the beginning. When and in what context did you begin working with historic photographs?

Dor Guez: I started working with archives in 2006, as a part of my studies and my PhD research on Orientalist style photography in the Zionist archives. Three years later I started working with archival footage as a visual artist and not only as a writer.

In 2009, I found a suitcase under my grandparents' bed, packed with plastic bags filled with photographs and other documents from the first half of the 20th century. I had never seen these materials before, and I remember wondering why they were not organised in family albums as is the habit with these sorts of photographs (weddings, baptisms, studio photographs for Christmas, etc). With my grandparents' permission, I took on the task of organising them into albums. I tried to build the conventional narratives of family albums and to organise them accordingly. As the unofficial historian of the family, and maybe also as the eldest grandson, my grandparents let me deal with these materials. I found myself editing our histories over and over again in various versions and possibilities, but I failed with the primary task of making family albums. I realised what my grandmother understood all along: it is an impossible mission. She gave me time to reach that conclusion on my own, and to fail on my own, as she had in the past.

MA: What is the significance of working with this historic material for your work?

DG: This accidental encounter with a single suitcase was the starting point of the Christian Palestinian Archive (CPA) project, which is the only archive today dedicated to the Christian Palestinian diaspora. The CPA was also a turning point in my

artistic practice, and it provides the basis for all of my installations: it can be one picture, or a series of 15 photographs dressed as a family album. It was when I started writing, recording and filming (as a part of my attempt to contextualise the materials) that I realised why my grandmother had packed them compactly and put them away under my grandfather's side of the bed, like a sort of embodied, physical subconscious. One cannot classify them in the common genre of "family albums"; they are evidence of a life "before" and "after" (some of them even "during") one year (1948) and an ongoing catastrophe.

MA: The material qualities of the original photograph—its surface texture, tears and creases, and evidence of handling—are high-lighted in what you call a "scanogram". What is the importance of emphasising that the historic photograph is not only an image, but also an object?

DG: You described it correctly. The meaning of the term "scanogram" is literally drawing with a scanner machine. Every scanogram is made by three layers of scanning, each scan is programmed to feature a different aspect of the material, and then I compose the layers into one image. A scanogram is my personal interpretation of historical material from the CPA. Naturally, the process relies on a personal perspective and the outcome differs from the original photograph. This technique of multi-scanning stresses the history of the document as an object, meaning the rips and tears become very prominent in an almost abstracted way and take on a three-dimensional format in their size and scale. The scanograms offer ways of re-presenting these documents and seeing them through sharp, high resolution prints. Scanograms are activated as contemporary 'objects' or, to be more accurate, as a result of their contemporary physical condition.

In other words, the original photograph, as a physical object, has a history of its own, and the scanograms are trying to bring this story to the surface.

MA: As you are describing your process, it strikes me that once you transform these photographs into scanograms, each picture effectively has two authors and two dates of creation: that of its original and then your revival in a new form and context. How does this historical and authorial dualism reveal itself in the scanograms?

DG: Indeed, a scanogram tells two stories (with two dates) that complement each other: the first is in the morphological content of the photograph, "Samira in her wedding gown", for example, and the other is the story of the photograph itself since it was printed: the tears, the folds- the fact that Samira's wedding photographs were saved under the bed and they are not organised and kept "appropriately" in an album. The scanogram of the wedding photograph tells the history of what they refuse to talk about directly. It is exactly the condition of a physical subconscious.

MA: Do you think about your work as an interaction with the original photographer?

DG: Yes, not only by my scanner's interpretation, but also with my act of abandonment of the originals; I almost never keep the original photographs. I scan the photograph or any other document, and send it back. The goal of the CPA is to become an online database, and I have no interest in expropriating the photographs from their original "plastic bags". The materials will probably disappear with time in the hands of their keepers. That is the story of photography; it has a time limit if you don't keep it in archival conditions. I know it is hard to grasp how a person who is dedicated to research in archives can let these original materials go, but this is the nature of this media we call photography, and I respect it. A scanogram, therefore, is only one point in time, one date, which interacts with other dates, when the camera lens snapped and the photograph was printed.

MA: I understand your thoughts, however, I must admit that as a photograph curator, when I was watching *40 Days*, I winced when Samira tore apart the photographs of the Lod cemetery with the sigh, "must be done." At the same time, I was impressed by the symbolic power of this gesture, which emphasises both the physicality and fragility of those photographs as objects and as historical records. What is your relationship to those pictures as evidence and as history? How have those thoughts shaped your artistic practice?

DG: I definitely share your feeling of unease; when it happened, I took a deep breath watching her damaging them so severely. I could have taken the photographs from her hands, and separated them gently from the humidity that pasted them together, but it was her

prerogative. Now, it is the story of these images as objects, and in order to tell the full story this act “must be done”. The two stories of the photograph intersect here in a poetic way: the morphological content is the documentation of destruction, and the terrible way those photo-graphs were held and then separated, the history of the photograph as an object, is a second layer of destruction.

The *40 Days* video is an opportunity to watch an expedited process of interference in the original photographs. I sat with Samira in the living room, the camera between us, and we talked about the latest destruction of the Christian cemetery in our town. While we were talking about it, she told me that my grandfather, Ya’qoub (Jacob), took photographs to document this violent act for the police, as official evidence. It was the only documentation of the demolition, and since the police didn’t solve the case, he got them back. Samira kept them in a kitchen drawer, where they were exposed to moisture from her cooking, and she sent me to find them while we were shooting. Usually, my scanograms reflect years of weathering, but in this case the story of the object was built in minutes, while the camera is filming. This video keeps the same logic of the CPA as an archive based on digital scans. It is her photograph, and it is her right as the owner to destroy it, and to hide it in her kitchen.

MA: *40 Days* opens with statistics about the Christian Palestinian minority of Lod, and of Israel, as well as an account of the repeated vandalism of the town’s Christian cemetery. Against a backdrop of these cold facts, a hauntingly intimate portrait of a couple unfolds. The snapshots that Ya’qoub took to document the vandalism of the cemetery and Samira’s explanation of them, as if pages from a family album, bridge the political and the personal. When did you learn about these pictures of the cemetery? Did you ever discuss them with Ya’qoub? How do you relate the two halves of this film: the subject of the Lod cemetery and of Ya’qoub and Samira?

DG: Ya’qoub, Samira and I never talked about the pictures before. As the camera is our third eye, all stories started when the camera is operated. It immediately creates a new array of relations between us. As for the two narratives in the video, you put it accurately. Like most of my video works, *40 Days* offers a deeply personal story which relates to a larger narrative. In this case, it is the death of Ya’qoub and his memorial service, 40 days later and, at the

same time, the story of the place where he is buried, the Christian cemetery in Lod, which every few years is being vandalised by other religious groups. It is a hate crime. Maybe it is only a question of time before his grave will be damaged as well. The destruction of the cemetery reflects the situation of the Christians as a minority and, more generally, the human condition of being vulnerable.

MA: The film is situated historically by its dedication to Ya’qoub Monayer, who lived from 1920–2011, and in the timeframe laid out by Samira as she discusses the epitaphs of family graves, specifically her mother who died in 1979 at age 80. From this perspective the history of the entire 20th century is cast in the individual lives of the film’s subjects. I see this as related to your scanograms, which take on complex, overshadowed chapters of history in the form of personal and candid family pictures. How do the details of these individuals’ lives speak to more universal concerns?

DG: Being a minority is the constitutive condition of this century. It is not only being numerically outnumbered, but a question of different contexts as well; gender, education, economic status, etc. In fact, at some point in our lives we all experience the feeling of being a minority, but for some of us this condition is suppressed. You can look at my work and reduce it to an aesthetic statement regarding my culture or the history of my region, even the art of telling a story—all correct. But, I hope it is also about human solidarity. The term “minority within a minority” becomes a sort of metaphor in my work; in my eyes we are all Christian Palestinians.

It is also your cemetery that is being repeatedly destroyed.

MA: Several times the film lingers on something that is poignantly absent. I am thinking of the scene of the gravestone with only half a cross, the imprint of the missing half stained onto the pale stone back; or the 40-day service in the church, where a piece of white paper obscures the head of the priest; or the heart wrenching final scene with one pair of feet stretching out in the early morning light of a bed, ignoring the ringing phone. What is the role of absence—visually and conceptually—in *40 Days*?

DG: The role of absence is to create a gap for you to fill. It also reflects our inability to tell a full story, both visually and conceptually.

I will expand on one absentee, who requires an explanation: the wrinkled piece of white paper showing in the 40-day memorial service in the video. In past installations, I have dealt with the complex relationship between the Christian community and the Orthodox Church. There is a cultural gap between the church leaders, who are in Europe, and the congregation. In my installation *St. George Church* (2009) you see the priest giving a sermon in Greek, a language that is not understood by the parishioners, while an interpreter from the community translates his words into Arabic. The Sunday mass takes three hours because of this act of translation, and obviously there are many situations “lost in translation.” In *40 Days* you see the priest reading from a paper that is being held against his face, so he will remember the names of the deceased family. It is the only time in the video that you actually see a human face, and it is being concealed most of the time by the priest’s note, leaving his presence as a remote representation of the religious leadership of the Orthodox Church.

MA: Arabic, its daily vernacular use, and its easy mixture with Hebrew into a local dialect, is a thread that weaves through the film starting with the salutations of the phone calls that open the film and throughout in Samira’s conversations, as well as in the final “read” liturgy of the priest. What is the importance of Arabic in telling this story, in painting a portrait of the generation of Ya’qoub and Samira?

DG: Three languages play a role in my videos: Arabic, the mother tongue, which is used for the act of remembering; Hebrew, the acquired tongue, which is mainly used to describe events that happen after the war; and Greek, the religious ritual tongue, which we don’t understand at all.

MA: The narrative structure of *40 Days* is poetic. Rather than identifying the characters, illustrating their features, and describing the series of events that transpire within the film, you present a sequence of filmic snapshots of tightly framed gestures, details and symbols.

DG: You describe it beautifully. The story is being told by hand gestures.

MA: The complexity of identity—religious, cultural, linguistic, territorial, historical—is a central subject throughout your work. This complexity is often revealed by partial documents or questions without answers. Please discuss the role of the unknown in your practice?

DG: Yes. It is evident in my work that there are more questions than answers, and you actually leave the work questioning yourself. It is a wonderful state of mind to be in—the condition of asking. The answers will be shaped by the individuals themselves. They are pointed at/for you.

Another thought: we are constantly preoccupied with our own identity—maybe it is a reaction to globalisation, and maybe that’s how we’ve always been. Did you notice that since the internet revolution, there are more and more archives being established? Do you think it is partly a reaction of preserving our singularity?

Maybe it is a topic for our next talk.

MA: What motivates your work?

DG: Memory.

Thank you for your questions.

MA: Thank you for your thoughts, Dor, and most of all for your work.

Mitra Abbaspour is an Associate Curator in the Department of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. At MoMA, she participates in a collaborative research endeavour to study the material and aesthetic development of photography in the early 20th century. Her doctoral research focused on photographic archives and their methods of writing a history of photography in the Middle East.