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WHEN THINGS OCCUR

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**BY DOREEN MENDE**

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*When Things Occur* (2016) by Oraib Toukan is based on Skype conversations with Gaza inhabitants who were behind the images that were transmitted from screen to screen in the summer of 2014. The subsequent remarks are organised in four short segments that end up with open questions which expand the reflections touched upon here.

### (ONE)

Watching artist and researcher Oraib Toukan's *When Things Occur* (2016) makes one want to better understand the contemporary conditions of image processing as a militant-civil force. *When Things Occur* is a conversation piece, a visual research, an investigation, a desktop-documentary, and a collection of perspectives on contemporary image-(geo-)politics accommodating the Palestinian struggle for independence, including the right for visual self-determination. The work offers a reflection on techno-spatial conditions of image processing as an internationalizing force, as well as an enforced violence for the struggle of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territories, particularly in Gaza after the Israeli attacks of 2014. Let us think of a civil contract of digital photography by considering the usage of the (mobile-phone) camera that people occupy to report from their homes under attack, posted in real-time or live-streamed on #GazaUnderAttack or on social media platforms. "[...] We would be under bombardment, shaking with fear, but I won't let go of my mobile phone", says Lara Abu Ramadan, reporting from Gaza. A "seeing the war from inside the home" that is shared online speaks of that techno-civilian force in *When Things Occur*. How can we understand the politics of the domestic attached to mobile phones, social media or networking services and digital platforms in relation to the possibility of an emancipatory image?

### (TWO)

The relation between 'local' and 'foreigner' narrated by Gazan freelance photojournalist Hosam Salem, is an important sequence in *When Things Occur*. He clearly differentiates between 'local' / 'mahaliyin' and 'foreigner' / 'ajnabi' in Arab language. His award-winning Gazan colleague Khalil Hamra speaks about himself as a 'local photographer'. Strikingly, he

adopts the English term 'local' instead of the Arabic 'mahaliyin'. Similar perhaps to the term 'curator', commonly used in English in Arabic, the adaption of 'local' into Arabic by a Palestinian photographer speaks of two things: of the awareness the photographer has of his job under the impact of globalization in economic, cultural, linguistic as well as visual terms, and of the urgency to re-articulate the entanglement between the particular ('local') with the universal ('global') or the 'local' with the 'foreign', in relation to the production of a ramified image-space, as investigated by *When Things Occur*. Digital image-making asks for an update of a geo-spatial reading of the image that I would link with the 'navigational landscape', as Reza Negarestani proposes by theorizing the interaction of the with the universal (or global-local interlacement, or the local-foreigner entanglement) in our era of algorithmic capitalism as a form of global capitalism. I wonder, regarding the exhausted and exploited concern for image-politics in the Palestinian struggle, about the visual-practical consequences of mobile-phone images, planetary computation and social media for our understanding of a 'productive locality' of the image, which is an image 'across different scales of magnification'. When *Things Occur* analyses the image by documenting it through its pixel-grid, the variety of online image sizes (pixel dimension and scale styles), or the page of Google-images showing copy after copy the same picture. A good example is the front-page of *The Guardian* of July 31, 2014, featuring the image of a crying Gazan girl taken by the international Gazan freelance photojournalist Khalil Hamra. To consider the possibility of the image as a techno-spatial platform, or as a geopolitical fabric crossing borders, time zones, eyes, and perspectives in *When Things Occur* allows us to approach the form of screen-navigation as a 'concept-practice' (Tom Holert) that stretches from 'inside the home' in Gaza to our computer-screens in Oxford, Athens, Berlin, Geneva or in transit at the airport. In this sense, *When Things Occur* may point us to the emergence of a new visual vocabulary to document and internationalize the Palestinian Cause by making use of digital infrastructures for the production and distribution of images. However, is it too naive to anticipate the emergence of a navigational image-space with the capacity to go beyond the indexical document towards a truly transformative

operation that interrupts reproductive forces of 'infrastructural violence', as Susan Schuppli describes the systemic erosion of rights beneath the digital cladding, and that instead can install complex narrations of the Palestinian situation through images?

### (THREE)

*When Things Occur* also makes us engage with the economic implications of digital image technologies in the context of (anti-)photojournalism regarding the Palestinian question. This has been a big issue for decades, concomitant with Marxist-Leninist commitments of filmmakers and photographers of the P.L.O. since the late 1960s. Obviously, the possibility to circulate images via social media platforms puts pressure on the monopoly of international press-agencies with headquarters in Paris, Rotterdam or New York. Defining the conditions to sell an image is a possible force for a visual self-determination also in economic terms. Does this also affect the actual visual strategy? Hosam Salem states that "we as local photographers have finally concluded that bloody pictures do not address the western world". However, in *When Things Occur* we see the travelling images of iconic tropes that are too familiar from the humanitarian discourse since the early 1980s: the lone child and the mourning parent. It seems logical that Palestinian photographers must be ahead of our time to think as well as produce an image beyond the binary imperatives of the local-foreigner entanglement. What image of the struggle would address the so-called 'western world' if it refuses the victim-image for 'mobilizing shame' as Tom Keenan analysed the visual forms of humanitarian violence more than ten years ago? What does resistance to the Occupation look like, and how do its images circulate today?

### (FOUR)

The 28-minute desktop-video investigates and labours the techno-spatial conditions of image processing. It considers the situation of Gaza after the 2014-wars entangled with global infrastructures. Thus, it provides an important analysis of a visually exhausted and exploited terrain that has been overproduced by media images for decades, by Human Rights discourses as well as by the field of international contemporary art, the arena where *When Things Occur* is presented. The desktop-video

offers an update of the urgency to re-engage with the question of the image as a geopolitical issue for the Palestinian cause. Its image-regimes offer a contested terrain as well as a lived reality and politics of the domestic in which 'nobody will understand how we are living', as Gaza international photojournalist and blogger Lara Abu Ramadan states in her conversation with Oraib Toukan. The film probes the face of mourning and grief—its digital embodiment, transmission, and representation. It asks, as Toukan has written elsewhere, how the gaze gets channelled within the digital realm, and how empathy travels. What exactly is viewing suffering 'at a distance'? What is the behaviour and political economy of the image of war? And who is the 'local' in the representation of war?

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### CREDITS

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