
35'

By Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh

A beam of light is streaming through a tiny hole in the door. It crosses the room, throwing a vague image onto the wall opposite the door. The image is blurry, and it flickers.

We are sitting in a room that has no window, no daylight.

It is in one of the four hours in the day when the government electricity is off. It is the local generator that provides electricity. The light is weak. We open the bag, and the first thing we do is not look at the photographs, but sort through them.

There are printed photographs, negatives, a few super8 films, video tapes and also audio cassettes. The material is partially organized already. There is a folder with sleeves full of ID photographs, for example. Some photographs are arranged by film, and others are simply filled into small albums. We make different piles that we spread on the living room floor.

I scan the walls for a light switch, thinking 'we are looking at photographs almost without light'.

The image still flickers. Momentaneously it disappears completely, as if something or somebody were covering the hole or obstructing the light. But even when the image appears, it is not an image, but only a trace of an image in the becoming or rather in the process of disappearing. It is still blurred and it is as if it is dancing.

It was her that had come to look for me. Somebody had told her that I was interested in photographs from the camp. I remember how she came up to me, saying: "I heard you are looking for photographs. Whenever you have time, come to my house, I have a bag full of them...." Her eyes were sparkling, and her smile lit up the room. She went on telling me that during the wars in the '70s and '80s, the first thing she would do when the bombings started was to store the bag somewhere secure. She said that although her house was destroyed twice, the photos were still intact.

[sound file with subtitles - press 1]

I remember her sparkling eyes, and her smile that lit up the room when she spoke about the bag full of photographs. Today it's the first time I see it. She goes to her room to get it. It's a big leather bag. I didn't imagine it would be that big.

The first photographs we look at more closely are those of Amsha (meaning: the bleary-eyed). There are three of them.

[project first image]

In one of them the camera is at an intimate distance, showing two women holding each other. Amsha is on the left, and Hasna crouches by her side, with one arm around her shoulder, and the other holding Amsha's hand. They fill the frame of the image, Amsha's head and Hasna's hair are half cut-off. Hasna is wearing trousers, a long-sleeved top with a turtleneck and a tight light colored sweater with short sleeves. Amsha seems to be wearing several layers of skirts and a dark jacket. A scarf is tied loosely over her hair. Behind them one can see what seems to be a door. This is likely a photograph Hasna has taken herself with the delayed shutter-release of her camera. I can imagine exactly how she placed the camera on the unfinished wall and how she then rushed to pose next to Amsha.

The photo suddenly starts to tremble as if the viewfinder is searching to hold on to its subject as the camera falls to the ground.

[lay down projector]

Outside, the daylight is gone, we still barely see our hands. The camera itself is fine and undamaged, she takes it out of the bag and looks through the viewfinder, the photograph dissolves into nothingness.

The next photograph that appears in the viewfinder is clearly taken by someone else. Someone tall. Let's imagine it to be Rashid, Hasna's brother, behind the camera.

[project second image]

Hasna stands behind three women. She is the tallest.

On the left Hamde, her uncle's second wife, in the middle, Halimé, and on the right, Amsha. Again Hasna has her hand on Amsha's shoulder. Only two of the women look at the camera. They stand in front of the door of a house, probably their house. But nothing indicates its entire shape, or its location. The only reference of time and space is a poster on the wall. It shows a martyr. His name is barely visible under his portrait.

And then the photo is obstructed and all that is left is the smoke from a cigarette floating in the air.

[lay down projector]

The third image that is illuminated seems to be part of the same black and white negative film, but I still wonder if it has not in fact been taken yet?

[project third image]

It shows Amsha and Abude, Hasna's nephew, they both sit on stools close to a wall. The wall is painted in two colors, the lower part appears grey and the upper part white. The horizontal line that separates the two colors passes just above their heads. Abude faces the camera. Amsha does not. She is turned towards Abude. She looks to the ground right in front of her feet. As if she has been placed there. Deep shadows fall across the photograph. Its strong contrast and sharp geometric forms make the image seem timeless. In fact it might have been taken yesterday, and those in the picture are Imm Rajab, and Abude's son Youssef. It might even be taken tomorrow.

[lay down projector]

[sound file with subtitles - press 2]

But let's return discreetly to that afternoon when we started sorting through the photographs. We are still sitting in a nearly dark room and Hasna is holding the photographs of Amsha in her hands:

[sound file with subtitles - press 3]

She goes on telling me about the slide films she found those days in the rubble of Burj al-Shamali camp, « I was so lucky to find these films, she says, as I had no more. I loaded them and went around the camp to photograph the destruction and the feddayin. But when I went to the studio a few weeks later, the photographer told me he could not develop these films. *When the bombardments stopped, I took the two films to Saida. There they told me I would need a machine to see the photographs. So I kept them as they were. I think they are somewhere in the bag.* » She puts her hand in the bag, and then puts something in my hands. Two film rolls. She stays silent, as if the silence is necessary for me to visualize the images of these two rolls.

silence - and video - press 4

The stream of light coming through the little hole in the door is growing again in intensity. Little by little an image becomes visible. It is unfocused, or rather seems to be composed of several layers of superimpositions. It becomes sharper. A landscape is drawn on the wall. The image still moves a little. What seem to be waves of the sea, could also be fields of wind-blown grass, or clouds in the sky.

The electricity is cut. The generator is shut down, government electricity comes back. The ceiling light comes on. Somebody knocks at the door. Outside the sun shines bright, our eyes become filled with darkness. We cannot even see who is in front of the door.

[sound file with subtitles - press 5]

We agree to look at all this material together, little by little. And it is starting from that day that we meet regularly. In the beginning we work during the day, but everytime someone knocks at her door, she packs away everything, and takes the bag into the other room. So in the end, in order not to be disturbed, we very soon shift to working at night.

We are talking about images in general, about single photographs and we pursue everything that emerges from them. The last time I see her she shows me the latest videos she has filmed with her mobile phone. As she says, she filmed Nabatiyeh camp, and while showing me the videos she points out where the different parts of her family used to live, where the school was, the oven; and she explains why they moved to Burj al-Shamali camp even before the complete destruction of Nabatiyeh camp in 1974.

I am looking at a small telephone screen showing a green moving landscape.

[project fourth image]

However, what I'm seeing is a photograph of these same hills. Her sister Siham is standing in front of a laundry line on which white sheets billow in the wind. The line attached between two makeshift shacks struggles to hold its load. Above the shacks appears the backdrop, a horizon lined with trees. Siham holds her daughter on her hip and poses with her mother in law. They are smiling, but they are not facing the camera. It seems they are looking at someone we cannot see. And there is a little girl that runs into the picture from the left lowerhand corner of the photograph. She seems to run towards the tiny alley between the two shacks. Hasna says the alley that leads from these two shacks to the next where her uncle lives is a particularly narrow one, where you can only walk sideways. You have to turn your head to see where you are stepping.

With the dusk the photograph fades in the dark while the lady in the background of the photograph steps out of the frame on the left side, and the little girl disappears down the little alley.

[nabatiyeh video - press 6]

[lay down projector]

Hasna says, she thinks that few people visit the camp nowadays. Anyway they have to want to look for it to see it.

In fact the image is upside down. The landscape on the wall is at its sharpest yet. Olive and lemon trees line the horizon. They stand on their heads, as if they reach for their roots. Cows, goats, sheep and donkeys graze between the trees. A salty breeze coming from the sea fills the room.

Three years after I met her, Hasna suddenly passed away. We had not finished our work, even though we spent countless nights together around her photographs.

We saw each other on Friday, we agreed on our work schedule. I went to Beirut for two days, when I received a message saying, « Hasna died tonight ».

I rush back to Burj al-Shamali. When I arrive to your house, it is full. Full of crying women: in the living room, in your room, in the kitchen, even in your little atelier.

And suddenly I see all these images we looked at together animate. I go towards each of your sisters and greet them by their names, even though I have never met them before. I know how they looked when they were 10, when they were 20, 30 and even when they were 40. Now they are standing in front of me as if these various photographs you recalled again and again have come to life. It is as if they are stepping out of the photographs. Many of them also know me, even though they have never seen me before. While we greet each other, hug each other, I notice a few more people looking at me, I can see Amsha still sitting on the stool, silent, - as if she was placed there.

And the little girl who runs. She stops to look at me and then disappears into the little alley.

The women have already prepared you, and the men are about to take you to the graveyard, when a hand grabs my hand and pulls me into the little room of your house, where only the close family gathers around you. I find myself in front of you. You are wrapped in a white tissue, your face is slightly blue. I don't know what to say, nor what to do, I am trembling. I don't know why, but I intuitively reach for my camera in the bag, I direct it on you, there is no light in the room, and I do not focus, but I take a photograph. This is when I notice that this is the only photograph I have taken of you in all these years. The film roll is as it is. It is in a wooden box on the shelf behind my desk.

silence - and video - press 7

The image becomes distorted again, it flickers and then the paradisiacal landscape slowly fades with nightfall. The wall is dark, it is uneven, as if the images are engraving themselves into it.

[sound file with subtitles - press 8]

As the light on the wall once again picks up its movement, the landscape has transformed.

A little alley has carved its way past the fields. It looks like the alley itself is in movement, as it is rushing into the wall. It seems to dig a tunnel, making the makeshift shacks and walls on both sides collapse and so obstruct the sky.

[sound file with subtitles - press 9]

The image is still upside down. It is difficult to dissociate its different layers. There is no sky anymore. Construction reaches from the very bottom of the image to the top. The walls have come closer. They seem to be right in front of the door. In fact there is no light any more, no projection, no images...

What are left are the traces the light has carved into the wall superimposing images onto the same surface. The wall itself started dematerializing, it disintegrates...

35 min.

I'll conclude with the words of Evgen Bavcar: « It is time, or more precisely its duration, that reveals the essence of an image ».

35' by Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh
