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Visual Narratives and Lens of the Youth Collective: Framing the Revolution and its Afterlives

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"It's often argued that photography is a kind of fiction—if imagination is to fiction what belief is to the truth, then photography is the act of taking fiction closer to the side of sheer fact. Art is a reflection of the world, and the camera is ostensibly a recorder of time and space, and that's probably why the images we see become the truth." Adam Rouhana

Introduction

Lens of the Youth [collective] ('adsat al-shābb, hereafter LYC) are loosely coordinated Facebook pages of photographs that initially appeared in Damascus 2012 approximately one year after the start of the uprisings.2 The impetus for the collective, comprised of amateur and professional photographers, was documentary (for archival and evidentiary purposes) and communicative. Risking arrest and injury, photographers ventured out to document events: demonstrations, the aftermath of blasts, the deportation of civilians, etc., and also at the request of locals to check on the condition of a house or street, and to see if it was safe to pass and/or return. The images were typically

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accompanied by a date and location, and sometimes a brief description. Other cities soon followed suit [‘adsat al-shābb al-Tal; Dayr al-zūr; Ḥums; Ḥama, and sometimes devoid of place like al-tāfih (silly)].3 At the moment of capture, the images communicated a disruptive and unpredictable present-time, yet, over the years they have become an accidental archive of historical and personal moments, material objects, people, sites, and memories long past. As much as this essay is an attempt to read the images connectively, as chapters of a long narrative in a protracted war, it also argues that these images both contributed initially and continue to contribute to the active work of community-making that is one of the outcomes of the revolution.

True to their logo “nāfidhatak ‘alā al-ḥaqīqa” (your window to the truth), LYC has been a vital connective tissue to Syria for me over the years, but especially during those early explosive and unpredictably violent ones when as outsiders we had little but our screens to stay connected, not wanting to bother friends and acquaintances there for updates. Notably, the LYC sites marked a turn in the visual language coming out of Syria, and like other cultural collectives at that time, LYC was reacting to the urgency to create and disseminate, i.e. to produce culture from the frontlines.4 Their visual language was not the language of war photography, but rather a vernacular expression of visual communication, and it is a project I have thought quite a bit about over the past few years.5 I use the term vernacular to define the logic of the visual expression. Vernacular is a local articulation, one that – to take from the architectural use of the word – is concerned with the domestic and functional rather than monumental. In post-colonial studies, the vernacular was language associated with the street, the colonized, the sub-altern.6 To think about vernacular knowledge is to orient away from the transnational, the modern, and the hybrid toward the local, the traditional, and the culturally autonomous. While the images circulated outside a Syrian environment, the first level of

communication was for and between Syrians. As war protracted, the images not only serve as sites of memory, but also as progenitors of futures still to come.

At the onset, the images marked a new grammar of Syrian life; of acts of resistance that not only countered the regime's official narrative, but that also signaled to Syrians that revolution was under way, posting daily on Facebook with date and location. Just as the act of photography for Palestinians in 1968 became a watershed moment for the burgeoning fedayeen (fidā'īn) movement, for Syrians, capturing moments between resistance and destruction was a way to see their own aspirations (as well as devastations) represented not by outsiders, but by their own actors.7

I want to start by framing the images within the work of Ariella Azoulay and in particular her text The Civil Contract of Photography which focuses on photography and Palestinians in Israel, the occupied territories, and in history.8 Azoulay demonstrates how photography can deterritorialize citizenship, reaching beyond conventional boundaries to plot out a political space in which the plurality of speech and action is actualized permanently by the eventual participation of all the governed (24-25). She writes about how various and new uses of photography can create a new community, in part actual and in part virtual. Notably, this was not a community of professionals or members of any particular church, party, or sect, but rather a new political community of people between whom political relations where not mediated by a sovereign ruling power that governed a given territory (emphasis mine) (22-23). In essence,

Azoulay's work shifts the practice of citizenship away from state power and erases the discriminating distinctions between citizens and non-citizens. In the context of the Syrian revolution and ensuing war, the images posted by LYC across the Syrian landscape generated synergy for unmediated encounters

between individuals, communities, events, locations, neighborhoods.

Unlike Sontag (whose work I will discuss below), Azoulay is concerned with the gaze of the one who is photographed, the agency of the gaze. She argues for a civil political space that the people using photography – photographers, spectators, and photographed people – imagine everyday. This is a space of political relations that are not mediated exclusively by the ruling power of the state and are not completely subject to the national logic that still overshadows the political arena (12). Before the revolution, Syrians were not able to actualize citizenry in the common sense of the word. While they were members of a political community, i.e. the nation-state that carries with it rights of political participation, the state was in practice an authoritarian regime and never acted like a nation-state, and as such Syrians were and to a certain degree continue to be essentially "non-citizen citizens" of Syria.9 So, if according to Azoulay photography forms a citizenry, a citizenry without sovereignty, without place or borders, without language or unity, and has a heterogenous history, a common praxis, inclusive citizenship and a unified interest (131), then perhaps the narrative of citizenry captured in the array of images by the Lens of the Youth contingents registers a durable practice that eludes the sovereignty of the regime.

The Images Now and Then

Lens of the Youth Dimashqi (Damascus) is the only contingent to still continually post timeline images since its inception. It has become the repository of Syrian memory of the hardships and destruction over the years, and since 2020 has been posting and reposting images from Homs and Idlib, especially of the camps for internally displaced persons. The more recent posts and images are markedly different from the first few years, most of the posts have turned into a kind of digital graffiti; a digitally

spray-painted message on a wall or a photo. The first of this kind is a message of solidarity to Nablus aka Little Damascus (10/25/2022) [Image A]. By this time, the kinds of communications LYC would transmit shifted to reflect the environment and conditions of protracted war. Using the form of graffiti —spray painting messages on public spaces—the editorial managers of the Facebook site have cleverly turned to digital walls to speak out [Image B]. There continue to be dated shots of daily life, but more and more digital graffiti appears. Many of these posts express pain, suffering, solidarity, and recognition of shared experiences of trauma and violence, especially, but not exclusively with Palestinians. Notably, there is more editorial commentary that accompanies the images rather than the initial typical practice of posting only date, location, and on occasion a brief exposition. This content shift follows logically from what life had become to live within the confines and routine of protracted war in Damascus. The mission to communicate had become a mission of connection.

Moving chronologically backward through the site's timeline, the images are a hodgepodge of "aftermath" shots that reflect the ways in which violence disassembles recognizable life, turning it into variations of rubble and resilience; piles of bricks, burned out cars on empty streets, destroyed stuffed animals, the cracked glass of a wedding photograph, the remnants of lives scattered and shattered, but also glimpses of sunlight seeping through bombed out buildings, children playing or wearing school backpacks, or sparrows alighting on a pipe (Images C, D, and E). Sited and dated these photos whether of destruction or durability, rays of sunshine or post-bombing dust storms anchor the past into a Syrian collective memory where viewers may engage in acts of commemoration and remembrance with these visual narratives.

Lens Young Deri (Dayr al-zūr) and Homsi (Ḥums) have stopped posting since 2017 and 2021 respectively, though many images

of Homs are also posted on LY Dimashqi, as noted above. One of the last posts from LY Deri is dated Jan 15, 2017. Titled "On the Shores of Death," it depicts a calligraphic design by Syrian artist and calligrapher Munīr al-Sha'rānī (Munir al-Sharani) that reads "No" to prison, killing, bombing, blockade, among other daily atrocities (Image F). The previous post on June 1, 2017 is a collection of undated old photos, postcards, envelopes, and newspaper clippings of nostalgic and iconic images from a bygone past, such as of the Euphrates River, suspension bridge, buildings, markets, stamps, and individuals.10 Like all Lens of the Youth images we do not know who posted this collection and whether they are in Syria, Dayr al-Zur, internally or externally displaced. Either way the poster reproduced and shared a collective visual history of the region that grants the viewer a peek through a nostalgic lens to a past that may also stand in for the future. Take, for example, the numerous images of the building of and the suspension bridge itself. Although a product of French colonialism, to see the various stages of building and usage of the bridge is to witness a time of Syria's global productivity and connectivity. Those who built and used the bridge and those who have recently witnessed its destruction are intractably linked by an image that was made in 1924 and continues to exist as an existential mechanism that asserts not just an image, but all types of labor, existence, and activities not governed by any sovereign power in the space of viewing, i.e. the allowance for a civil contract delineated by Azoulay.

LY Homsi stopped posting in 2021.11 The last posts are of the logo and requests that people contact them to use a photograph or the logo. This is preceded by a repost from 2014 of a caravan of busses (May 9, 2021), 7 years to the day after the event. The caption reads:

One of the last photographs of the siege on the old city of Ḥumṣ seven years ago. These were such difficult moments when approximately 2000 revolutionary fighters of Ḥumṣ were forced

to accept leaving the neighborhoods of Old Ḥums, Jūrat al-Shayāh, al-Qarābīṣ, al-Qūṣur and al-Khālidiyya, after 23 months of defending these parts from the armies and militias of Bashār al-Asad.12

The image and caption inscribe into collective memory both the armed resistance movement and the sites of battle without succumbing to victimization or defeat. There are no posts after June 14, 2017 until June, 9 2019, which is an image of the soccer player turned armed revolutionary leader ‘Abd al-bāsiṭ al-Sārūt’s shrouded corpse.13

The heavy price the people of Homs paid is captured with devastating, aesthetic care in two posts dated December 20, 2015 and August 30, 2015. The sepia-toned image of a decrepit ferris wheel foregrounding a desolate building evokes an eerie disquieting quiet (Image G). Bab al-amr, the site of some of the most intense bombing and fighting, stands like a cemetery in the landscape, a synecdoche of Syrian resistance (Image H). The 65 or so images between 2019 and the last post in 2021 are mostly shots of buildings that appear to be functioning, or at least are not in ruins, until the repost of the 2014 forced departure of the armed revolutionaries. Within this cluster, there are a few images of lone vendors, children playing, and a handful of street scenes with cars, people, cafes, but the majority capture a lack of life, of solitary architectural structures that despite the violence, remain standing. The death of al-Sārūt marks a narrative shift from a city that breaths (with revolution) to one that has come to a standstill.

We can only wonder what happened to the photographers who stopped posting, to the LY sites that suddenly ended one day. Was it that their mission no longer felt urgent? Or that there were no photographers left? Or those with a connection to LY? The sites do not tell us what happened after the last post, but they do tell us about what came before. That the people of whichever

region were there witnessing, capturing, and communicating, and their aftermath is the visual narratives they left behind.

Lan nuṣāliḥ/We will not reconcile

In the very first pages of Susan Sontag's influential essay "In Plato's Cave," which begins her exploration on the power of photographs and photography, she makes two important observations:

"To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power (my emphasis)."

She continues making an acute comparison between print and image:

"A now notorious first fall into alienation, habituating people to abstract the world into printed words, is supposed to have engendered that surplus of Faustian energy and psychic drama needed to build modern, inorganic societies. But print seems a less treacherous form of leaching out the world, of turning it into a mental object, than photographic images, which now provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present. What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire (my emphasis)" (2).14

These two passages from Sontag turn our attention to the actor and agency of taking pictures and the narrative possibility those images produce. The photographs of LYC do not help us understand the Syria war or revolutionary activity or resistance through photos. While the photographs do inarguably "fill in

blanks in our mental pictures of the past and present," (Sontag 17) they also provide an interpretative space for reflecting on the current state of the Syrian

revolution. Within the Dimashqi collective, Idlib had become both the physical and cyber site of revolutionary life. This is not a practice of revolution by and of itself, but rather, as per Azoulay, the practice of deterritorialization of citizenship outside regime sovereignty. Photography is one of the instruments which has enabled the modern citizen to establish their liberal rights, including freedom of movement and of information, as well as her right to take photographs and to be photographed, to see what others see and would like to show through photographs (Azoulay 125). Idlib, under the weight of thousands of internally displaced people and continued regime violence, lives and breaths (Images I and J), posted under LY Dimashqi, the capital city, i.e. seat of power, in name only. Turning again to Azoulay's formulation of citizenship beyond sovereignty, she writes:

Whereas the nation-state is based on the principles of sovereignty and territorialization, the citizenry of photography, of which the civil contract of photography is the constitutional foundation, is based on an ethical duty, and on patterns of deterritorialization. In principle, photography is an instrument given to everyone, making it possible to deterritorialize physical borders and redefine limits, communities, and places (processes of reterritorialization). The citizenry of photography is a simulation of a collective to which all citizens belong (128).

When the Lens of the Youth initiative started out in 2012, the photographers were responding to the urgency of documentation and communication in a time of violent uncertainty. The geography and production of revolution has changed since then, shifting from the major cities (Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Raqqa, and Dayr al-zur) to stake out new territories that challenge the

authority and legitimacy of the regime. The collection of images amassed by LYC since that time are a unique repository of anonymous gazes connected by the immediacy of the experience and recognition of a shared Syrian identity, one that embodies the capacity to recognize these buildings, bridges, streets, etc. as part of their collective experience. Photography "bears the traces of the meeting" (Azoulay 11). Photographer, place, and time stamped into Syrian history—whether a building in ruin or still standing, anti-regime graffiti, an aesthetic framing of armed fighters walking arm-in-arm down a desolate alley, street scenes, children at play, mourners in a cemetery—the gaze of the photographer and the photographed meet our own as we consider the kinds of relations that made the event possible. As such, if the photograph suggests a truth, as noted in the epigraph, then perhaps the truths that are exposed by LYC are those that help sustain the impulses of revolutionary acts from the past into the future.

Post Script

This essay is being edited early January, 2025, almost a month after Bashar al-Asad fled Damascus and thousands of prisoners have been freed from prisons, but was written in 2023-24. Many of the LYC sites have been re-initiated engaging in visual and written conversations about this new era.

Image A - post to Nablus (oct 25, 2022) https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=519687593502589&set=pb.100063840574765.-2207520000&type=3

Image B - https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=729761542495192&set=pb.100063840574765.-2207520000&type=3

Asad's face superimposed over bombed out building - eyes/doctor play

Image C
https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=123423263129026&set=pb.100063840574765.-2207520000

al-Khalidiya, Hums, March 2020, reposted on LY Dimashqi, March 23, 2021

the caption: The clouds and plants combined try bring life back here. But how can it return? How, when the spirit that composed it has left?

حاول الغيوم.. والزرع مجتمعة أن تعيد الحياة إلى هنا.. ولكن كيف لها أن تعود؟ كيف وقد غادرتها الروح التي ألفت؟

Image D
https://www.facebook.com/LensYoungdimashqi/photos/pb.100063840574765.-2207520000/3254594297942871/?type=3

Harasta, Eastern Ghouta, May 2020, reposted October 17, 2020.

caption: رُبوعٌ خلتْ مِن أهلِها وديارُ ... دموعي على أطلالهنَّ غزار

quarters are empty of people and homes...my tears on their ruins in abundant flow

(check if line of poetry)

Image - sparrows on piping (Nov 2, 2014) 25/2022

https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=704689982933328&set=p.704689982933328&opaqueCursor=AbrNUCNjeJ87UYJxZbxLeQ3V8HGxtQIRQ8nRbVc34Ie3ytZqX8CIeEZzS9TQB3KkPJUy1j8Yf8hdRpcHxto8aO7bPFXY9w0Wi-0DDgLXuBo7rD9wY8F5-vDazyY07fQ-kLDh_q_1884SUCKrHSa6wCMyEb0dr50E3my-EQvGoVUqEaaRLdj0fzFG1Hwx5hAte5nrw_mmsbxew8AmTKLM7wy_QACWZMYLzNG1lX1IZ_hEtC6H9SPK12gGmbi1

wXjEJSCGXryrGEWb_fP01mikFksKQK0dqWHYB5X0C870vVUMOFnRGjfm6Ek5GxxLeVumUJ5KIhkK44Gw3YkvoMCBecrlJ8sSlzLjV1J_Z0jA-Ko2fG2oPdetJaBQHT2ffSJrIrxp2enhT7pbVMJEp-i0on0SdcQCI5SNth8yoU_apYDDUndfxCgWroI3hC4a7c4XSjLs8NeTtuv35yw_89CV5u99VeUMcwbmQZ4P2DYxkCzf1fQ2GAwymqdQNe-svdfUD711xffDM4WeJTucXYXEZqEh2B3vKUmnsNVp1ocflRDVPRrPZuYv6_4tHIyo3ZAKN6ljtvFNQItvCrMQAUPSV6pw4ex7frfG2dxvdphDFzr54N3pY2B359ozj4fFhb8CqGPS4WShDzdPPQdPQd_yewTO

Image F - https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1209925259076745&set=pb.100069474685391.-2207520000

(al-Sharani)

image G - https://www.facebook.com/LensYoungHomsi/photos/pb.100064569046764.-2207520000/1064340863600839/?type=3

Homs, sepia-toned, dec 20, 2015 - empty building, ferris wheel

image H - https://www.facebook.com/LensYoungHomsi/photos/pb.100064569046764.-2207520000/1011074348927491/?type=3

Homs, sepia-toned Bab al-Amr neighborhood, in ruins, , August 30, 2015

image I - Idlib - demonstration - lan nusalih

https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=583622797109068&set=pb.100063840574765.-2207520000&type=3

Image J - little girl IDP camp Idlib

https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=557796873024994&set=pb.100063840574765.-2207520000&type=3