

I Am a Camera

How do creative individuals come to terms with the extreme reality of life in Israel?

Eight photographers gave the same unequivocal answers:

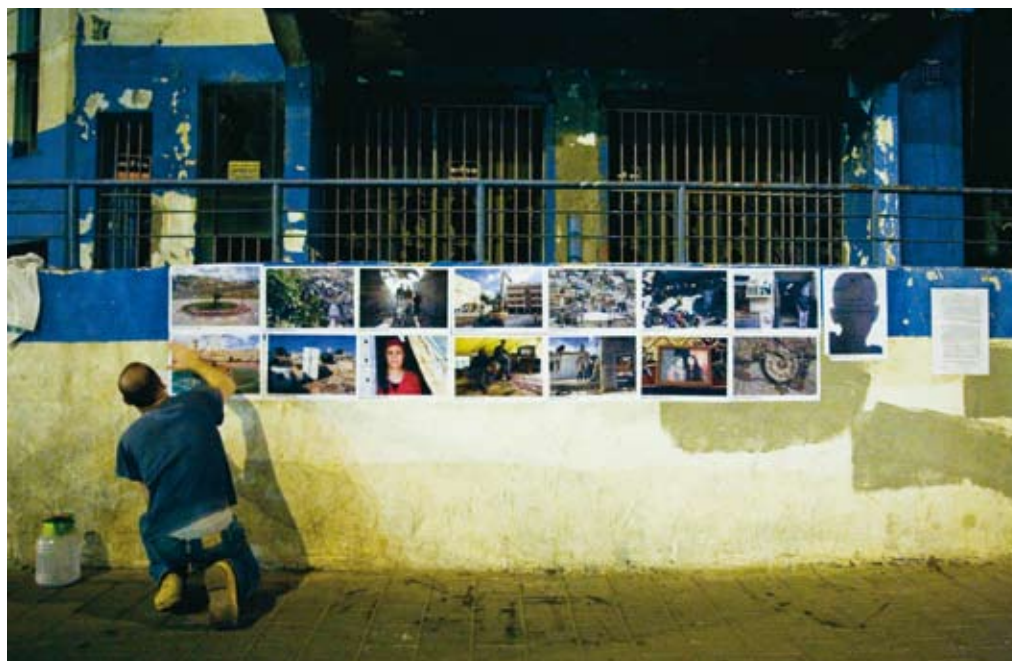
1. They do not distinguish between being a human being and being a photographer.
2. They act together as a unified group.
3. They use simple means to reach as many people as possible.

Armed with these three answers, they formed **ActiveStills** — BEN RONEN

In his remarkable documentary film *War Photographer*, the Swiss director Christian Frei travels with the photographer James Nachtwey, one of the 20th century's most important photographers and among the most prominent documenters of "disaster zones." During his travels to Kosovo, Indonesia and Palestine, Nachtwey – whose photographs regularly appear on the covers of the world's most prominent newspapers and magazines – has captured what he sees with incredible sensitivity, clearly motivated by a profound desire to have an impact on reality in his own individual way. As Frei's film reveals, Nachtwey always succeeds in getting to his destination at the right moment; yet he always operates on his own, as an outsider, a "foreigner" taking pictures. Although there is no disputing the amazing quality of his work and his degree of commitment, the film raises a number of fundamental questions concerning the work of those who choose to point their lenses at charged social and political conflicts and concerns. What is the status of the photographer arriving from the "outside," and to what degree does he identify with his subjects? Are his photographs intended to change the harsh reality they document, or are they undertaken in order to garner recognition and personal gain? Or perhaps all of the above? And what is the power of the individual compared to that of a group? Answers to some of these questions are provided by the members of ActiveStills, a political photographers collective based in Palestine and Israel.

Beginnings

The ActiveStills collective was founded in 2005 by four young photographers: Oren Ziv, 24, from Haifa; Yotam Ronen, 28, who



was born on Moshav Sde Nitzan in the Negev (full disclosure: He is also the writer's brother); Eduardo Sauteras, 34, a native of Cordoba, Argentina; and Keren Manor, 33, a native of Ashkelon. Over the past five years, the collective has grown to include a total of eight members from different backgrounds who share a similar personal devotion to political activism and to photography. They have organized and participated in dozens of exhibitions and projects worldwide, and their photographs have been featured in numerous magazines and newspapers. The members' works are all shaped by their political principles, which determine their mode of action and related decisions – including the decision to display their photographs independently, most often in the public sphere; to give them collective rather than individual credit; and to think of themselves first and foremost as uncompromising social activists. Keren Manor spent two years as a film student before quitting to pursue her interest in still photography. After living abroad for some time, she came back to Israel and enrolled at the School for Geographic Photography in Tel Aviv. "During that period, when I began photographing, I had no 'political orientation,'" she recalls. "It wasn't something I had ever been exposed to. One of the teachers I was

most influenced by was Miki Kratsman, who inspired me not only as a teacher, but also as a photographer, a human being and a political person. About halfway through the program, I began hearing about demonstrations against the Israeli separation wall and I was curious – initially thinking of them as a photographic subject. One day I met some friends who were headed for a demonstration, and I ended up joining them. I went without having an opinion or any knowledge about this subject. This first demonstration was in Bil'in, and it really shook my worldview and everything I had previously believed in. It was beyond photography; I was being exposed to things as a human being. Talking to Palestinians in the village and to other activists, and witnessing the behavior of the Israeli army, really shook my belief system, and I realized I had to build it up all over again. I continued going to demonstrations, and at the same time began dealing with political and social subjects in my photographs. Earlier on, I had photographed landscapes and cultures from a naïve point of view. Now I began photographing from a critical point of view. These two parallel processes influenced one another: They were about finding the place where you want to be as a human being, while also taking your camera there. Photography became a direct continuation of my life as a political activist."

Keren Manor: "During our first meeting we spoke about what we, as photographers who document the struggle but also **as people who want to make a difference**, can actually do. We reached the conclusion that we all take photographs, but most of them remain on our computers and don't reach an audience. There was no media platform we could identify with and use to transmit our messages"

From that point on, the road to the group's foundation was relatively short. Numerous photographers had always attended the demonstrations, yet most of them worked for news agencies and were detached from the larger political context of the events they documented. Nevertheless, there were also some photographers who wielded their cameras as a political tool; one way or another, they came to know each other. Their immediate focus was on finding an alternative vein of activity that would bring together their passion for photography with their desire to affect reality, and perhaps even bring about some kind of real change. "I came to know Eduardo [Sauteras] and Oren [Ziv] both as photographers and as people who identified with this struggle," Keren continues. "We decided to meet, and during our first meeting we spoke about what we, as photographers who document the struggle but also as people who want to make a difference, can actually do. We reached the conclusion that we all take photographs, but most of them remain on our computers and don't reach an audience. There was no media platform we could identify with and use to transmit our messages."

The First Exhibition

During that period, the struggle in the Palestinian village of Bil'in was gaining momentum. Several months earlier, this small village in the vicinity of Ramallah had launched an obstinate struggle against the construction of the Israeli apartheid wall on its lands. Soon enough, the village's few streets filled with Israeli and international activists, as well as with local and international photographers and journalists. The Israeli media repeatedly presented the demonstrations as "violent riots," without examining what had

actually led to them. The choice to stage an exhibition about Bil'in seemed natural to these photographers, who had become part of the struggle, and who had been following it since its inception. The format they chose was innovative and laid the visual and ideological foundations for subsequent activities organized by the group, which soon began working as a collective. Manor describes that initial period: "We began working on an exhibition, and at first we thought we could stage it at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque, but we quickly reached the conclusion that we did not want to exhibit our works in a place frequented by people who are already familiar with this struggle and who share our opinions. We wanted to show these images to people who knew nothing about this struggle, or who chose to ignore it. This is how we decided to stage the exhibition in the street. "The reason for this," she continues, "was the desire to expose as many people as possible to the photographs. For the price of staging a 'serious' gallery exhibition, we could print dozens or hundreds of images in a cheap format, posting them on the streets and exposing them to a large number of people. The second reason was that we wanted to bring this reality to Israeli cities – to present these views of the occupation to people who are mentally living at a great distance, despite their geographical proximity. The third reason was that this was a way of publishing our materials without depending on the media. The idea was to find direct ways to reach the public by bypassing various information filters. This decision also stemmed from the belief that the public sphere belongs to the people, and that exhibiting these photographs amounted to reclaiming the public sphere." The manner in which the photographs

were displayed was no less important than their content. To begin with, the group members carefully chose the places in which the "exhibitions" were hung – including a commercial center in the affluent Ramat Aviv Gimel neighborhood in the north of Tel Aviv, Dizengoff Square at the center of the city, the Florentin neighborhood and Jaffa in the south and the village of Bil'in itself. Moreover, the photographs were hung both independently and "illegally," plastered throughout the urban sphere by a group of young people on bikes, equipped with homemade glue. In the morning, when the streets came to life, it was difficult for passersby to ignore the exhibition that had sprung up before their eyes.

The Formation of the Group

The exhibition about Bil'in, the first initiative undertaken by the collective, was a success. Since the works were displayed on the street, it is difficult to estimate the number of people who saw them, yet the fact that many of the works were torn off (and subsequently hung up again) attests to their impact on the public sphere. The collective began receiving exposure. This exhibition was subsequently shown at dozens of venues worldwide; more important, however, is the fact that for the past five years, it has been an inseparable part of the activist center in Bil'in itself, and is visited each year by thousands of people. The success of this exhibition encouraged the group to keep working, while accepting additional photographers into the collective and formulating unique work methods and forms of collaboration with local populations. The numerous projects they have since created have involved Palestinian, Israeli and international photographers. Some of these photographers became members of the collective, while others have collaborated on

Image

ActiveStills street exhibition

10.05.2007



specific projects. Each of the photographers, moreover, brings a unique perspective to the group projects. One foreign photographer who has become a regular member of ActiveStills is Anne Paq, a 34-year-old French photographer who has been living in Bethlehem in recent years, and who joined the collective in 2006. Paq, who studied political science and human rights law, arrived in Palestine in 2003 to do research with an NGO, yet quickly found herself returning to photography, an old hobby. She then found her way to ActiveStills, whose members she met at various demonstrations.

“I began participating in demonstrations between 2004 and 2005,” says Paq. “At a certain point, I was working for an Israeli news agency, where I met Eduardo [Sauteras], and he was the one that invited me to an ActiveStills meeting in Tel Aviv. This was a big step for me, because I had previously hardly ever visited Tel Aviv. But I came, and in 2006 I joined the group, which became an important part of my life here.”

As the only member of the collective living in the West Bank, Paq’s stance is noticeably

different: She resides in Bethlehem and experiences the occupation on a daily basis, thus providing a different perspective than that offered by photographers living in West Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. She confesses that, “Although I am deeply committed to this struggle, I don’t experience the same emotions I would have if I were Israeli. It’s probably easier for me to get along with the Palestinians, and also to move more freely in places that Israelis are not allowed to enter [in Area A of the West Bank]. From a photographic point of view, the difference is that I can focus on documenting everyday life. I work with additional human rights organizations, and so I can enter refugee camps and other places that the Israeli members of the collective would have difficulty accessing. Another difference is that I am almost entirely focused on the occupation, while the other members also document other aspects of the local socio-political reality, such as poverty and immigration. Yet the greatest difference is, as I said, that I deal with the occupation on a daily basis, while other collective members return to their homes in

Tel Aviv or West Jerusalem. I don’t say they go home and forget what they saw, it’s just a different kind of burden.”

Collective

An examination of ActiveStills’ new Internet site (www.activestills.org), which features works created by group members over the past five years, reveals an impressive mass, in quantity and quality. In addition to the organization of street exhibitions, participation in various festivals (such as the international festival of photojournalism in Perpignan, France) and a series of collaborations with organizations such as the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions and Physicians for Human Rights, members of the collective spend most of their time and energy trying to attend as many significant political events as possible. They move between demolished Bedouin houses in the Negev and ongoing demonstrations against the occupation in Palestine; document the actions of Israeli immigration police; and attend anti-capitalist demonstrations worldwide.

The photographs they shoot are carefully

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chosen for display on their Web site, and are freely available for non-commercial use, since group members view free access to their work and the free distribution of information as important values. In several instances, however, they have had to confront commercial bodies that made unauthorized use of their work and in violation of copyright law.

In addition to documenting events for the purposes of exhibition and display, these images are often used as testimonies in support of activists who are arrested and wrongly accused, and for dozens of projects and exhibitions organized by human rights organizations and political groups worldwide. The group’s unusually prolific output, which does not compromise the high quality and originality of the works and their underlying political principles, is due mainly to the group’s adherence to a collective work model. Initiatives for new projects are born of personal connections forged by collective members, or are presented by organizations and groups. As Manor explains: “From our point of view, a collective is a group of

people who share a common belief and goal. We work together, without any kind of organizational hierarchy. Everyone is equal, yet also different in terms of his or her contribution. Each one of us chooses the way in which he or she contributes to the collective. We have meetings in the course of which we discuss different projects and divide up the work. Beyond that, each of us does whatever he or she can to contribute to the collective – through connections or through attending to the more technical aspects of our work, such as our new Web site. I think we enrich one another in terms of our work methods and ideas. As a group, we exert a greater influence than as individuals – both professionally and ideologically. When we work on a given project, we provide and receive criticism in a manner that encourages discussion, both of the photographs and of ideas. Our work as a collective is itself a political statement.”

One of ActiveStills’ earliest supporters is Manor’s former teacher Miki Kratsman, who is among Israel’s most important political and social photographers. According to Kratsman, “ActiveStills is one of the best things that has happened in the context of local photography. The problem is that, at a certain stage, once you are no longer a student, you have no peers to converse with and nobody relates to your work. Working as a collective allows for an ongoing dialogue that constantly involves fresh input and is related to what is taking place in the field. This enables them to undertake projects that would be impossible for an individual to realize. Working as a group allows for more serious work.”

Success

One of the questions raised by the work of ActiveStills, which clearly has no economic or

artistic aspirations, is how one can measure the group’s “success”?

According to Paq, “The very fact that we exist as a collective, and remain independent, is a great success. In addition, I think that the number of organizations that approach us reveals that our work is appreciated. Our exhibition ‘Jerusalem Dispossessed’ [created in conjunction with the celebrations in honor of the 40th anniversary of the city’s unification, and centered on the occupation’s impact on its Palestinian residents] was our best work thus far. It was created in collaboration with the Committee Against House Demolitions, featured works by most members of the collective and was exhibited worldwide.”

According to Kratsman, the collective’s greatest achievement is the work methods developed by its members. “One of the most noteworthy aspects of their work,” he says, “is that they began developing methods for working with local populations that extend beyond just taking a camera and shooting. Their work with populations under duress is both didactic and productive – it is aimed at producing something together with the community, and enabling it to see itself through the photographs. The group has formulated a method of action that extends beyond the confines of art galleries and newspapers, and brings the photographs back into the streets – a method that both provides an exhibition space and makes a powerful statement.”

Kratsman identifies a unique development that took place in the context of the collective’s work. “At some point, it just started happening,” he says. “At first they photographed events, and eventually they began photographing themselves within the events. The boundaries between them and the demonstrators, or between them

Images

From left, top row

Activestills street exhibition

10.05.2007

Alarakib

10.05.2007

Beit Umar

10.05.2007

Bethlehem checkpoint

10.05.2007

From left, middle row

Bethlehem

28.12.2007

East Jerusalem

24.01.2007

Jaayus

13.02.2009

Joint (34)

10.05.2007

From left, bottom row

Nilin wall

11.12.2009

Masara

10.08.2007

Nilin

26.06.2009

Refugees (30)

16.02.2008

All photographs, 30 x 45 cm

and what they were photographing, became blurred. Their activism came to the surface, and all of this is reflected in the photographs. This process, in which the photographer becomes the subject, is in itself fascinating. Photojournalists usually think they have to get as close as possible to the event, but here the boundaries are entirely blurred. It's a fascinating development."

Change

Since all members of the collective are first and foremost political activists who aspire to confront Israeli reality, the obvious question is whether they feel that the camera enables them to actually instigate change. "We are part of a much wider struggle," says Manor. "We are trying to contribute by doing what we are best at, which is photography. I don't presume to say that our photographs actually have an impact, but I think we have succeeded at exposing people to certain issues. In the long run, I can't say it will actually change things, but it has its own unique importance." Speaking about their presence in the field, Paq says: "Sometimes when the Israeli soldiers see photographers, they have a tendency to be more 'careful,' but in other cases it doesn't bother them; on the contrary, they aim at the photographers. But in a less direct, long-term vein, I do feel that we have an impact. We've already had people come and tell us that our pictures helped them develop an awareness of what was going on, and see it with new eyes. Sometimes it's frustrating, because there are no 'direct' results. How many Palestinians have said to me, 'You photograph and photograph and nothing changes.' Yet I don't do this to see immediate results, but because I feel it's the right thing to do."

The Future

Now that the status of ActiveStills is relatively stable and secure, one may wonder how the members of this group will continue to develop on both a personal and a collective level, and whether their future goals are strictly political, or also economic and artistic. The collective's members make no direct profit from their photographs, and earn a living by taking on various photography-related jobs at commercial or human rights organizations. Moreover, they do not like to define their work as "art."

As Manor states, "For me art has to be connected to the reality of the place we live in, especially at the present time. I personally cannot concern myself with escapism, and reflecting on the term 'art' seems like a luxury to me. It's not something that I scorn. I just don't think about it. As a collective, we have also exhibited in galleries. Our goal is to reach as many people as possible with our message, and not to receive artistic recognition for our work."

The collective's aspirations for the future are quite clear: "There are many more subjects I would like to pursue," says Manor. "Unfortunately, reality is still far from being close to what we aspire to, so our goal is to keep working and documenting things, in the hope of learning and continuing to evolve personally, but also as a collective, and that things continue to develop and reach as many people as possible."

Kratsman would like to see the collective continue pursuing its work with various populations, while also expanding its archive. "There is something here that is stronger than both art and journalism," he says. "But if you ask me, there is no doubt that what they are doing is art. In addition to being activists and journalists, they are also artists." ↪

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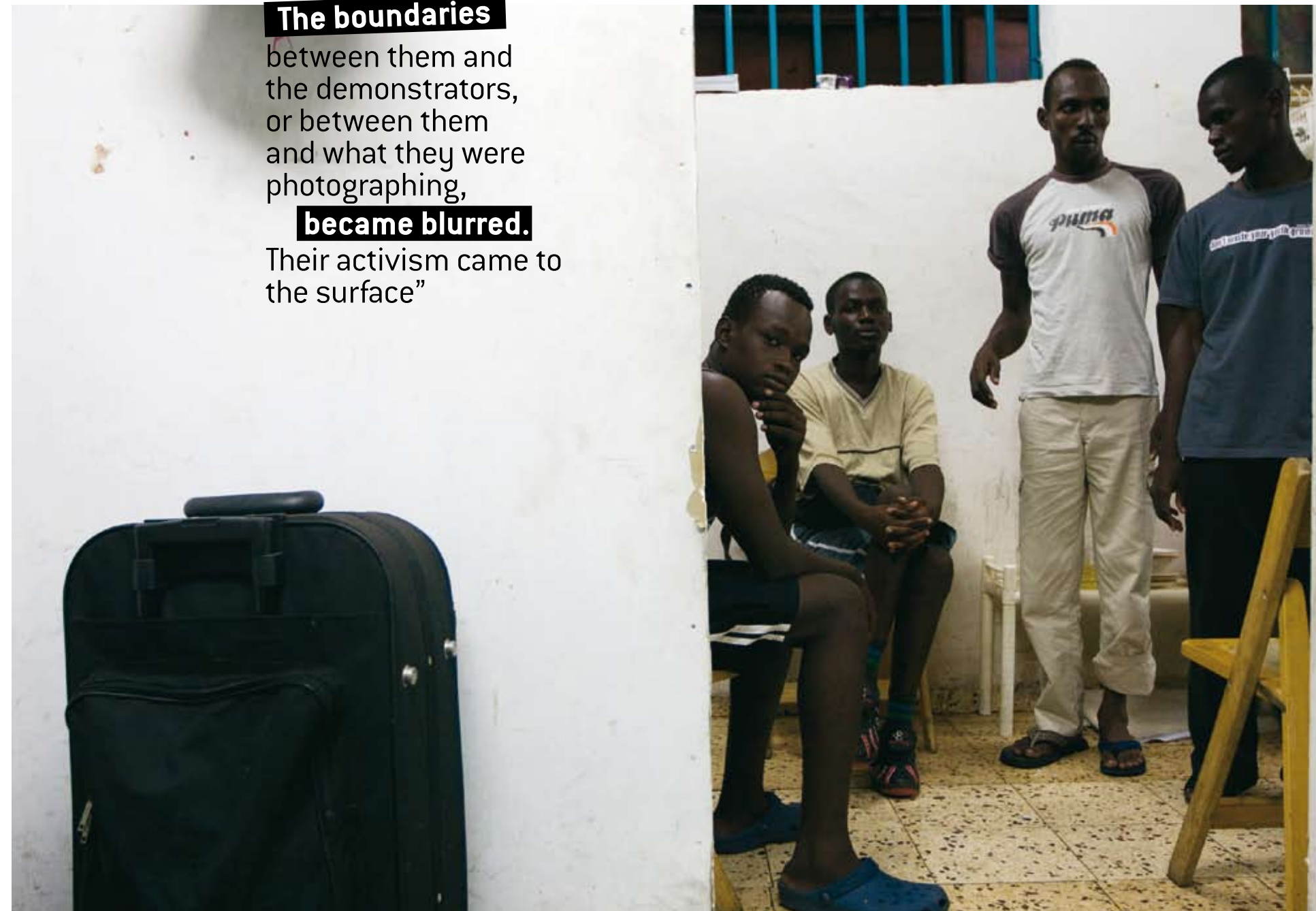


Image
South Tel Aviv
31.08.2008
30 x 45 cm