



## Vanunu Photographs and Is Photographed

**Mordechai Vanunu** has been located within the structure of the field as one dispossessed of the right to speak, and of all means of expression. This position, argues Galia Yahav, has been imposed on him not only in order to justify the "straightforward" censorship imposed upon him, but above all in order to camouflage the regime of the field to which we are all subjected

↳ GALIA YAHAV

**M**ordechai Vanunu took photographs, and was himself subsequently photographed. These two related photographic acts – “the photographic act as an act of treason” and “the photographic act as documentation of a kidnapping,” were surrounded by a series of plots and of ideological decisions and practices. They may be regarded as two climactic moments, which represented end result of the events that preceded them, and functioned as a catalyst for the events that followed in their aftermath. In order to understand their unique character, one must “get beyond hagiography and anecdote” and examine, as Bourdieu puts it, “the field of artistic production as a whole.”<sup>[1]</sup> My isolation of these two acts – the process of taking photographs and the process of being photographed – from their larger context is not undertaken in order to reinstate the understanding of photography as a (truth-producing) object, and of the photographic act as representing a decisive moment. Rather, a careful analysis of these two photographic instances may reveal how the complex tangle of events, motives, ideologies and agents to which they are related all revolve around the actions of seeing and speaking, as part of a political struggle to control these actions. This complex tangle cannot be reduced to the photographic object, cannot be attributed to a single photographer, and cannot be dated to the decisive moment at which the camera shutter clicked. Moreover, the prevalent emphasis that has been put, in this context, on “the decisive moment” and on its photographic outcome has been designed to counter and silence protest, and the expression of heterogeneous viewpoints, in favor of a

monolithic and homogeneous view of the political sphere. By contrast, the perception of photography as a layered process enables us to pay attention to the large number of factors (the background, the photographic act and the development, process, distribution and decoding processes) and actors (photographer, printer, distributor, decoder, interpreter, censor, viewer) that participate in the photographic act – thus making it possible to redeem photography’s critical potential.

1. Background: In the course of his academic studies and work at Israel’s Nuclear Research Center in Dimona in the 1970s and ’80s, Vanunu experienced a crisis of conscience. As a teacher’s assistant in the philosophy department and a political activist who opposed the war in Lebanon, he was deeply disturbed by the Bus 300 affair (which began with the failed 1984 hijacking of an Israeli bus and the killing of two of the Palestinian hijackers) and by the lies told by his employers. According to him, his decision “to speak about Dimona” was due to Israeli negligence concerning leaks and radioactive fallout, which continued even after the Chernobyl disaster.<sup>[2]</sup>

2. The Photographic Act: It took Vanunu about 40 minutes to snap some 57 color photographs on floors two to five of the plant in Dimona, including what was supposed to be a life-size model of a hydrogen bomb.<sup>[3]</sup> Both the photographic act and the photographed objects may be defined, in this context, as products created in the absence of consumer demand. Only in the context of a monopolistic regime of vision, which is governed by rules that prohibit reproduction, can one argue for a definition of this photographic act as an act of treason (rather than the breach of a work-related confidentiality agreement), and for the state’s

“right” to prosecute the photographer, who violated its prohibition on taking photographs, without having to prove that the photographs captured any actual facts, or that any real damage was caused to the state.

3. The Printing Process: In Sydney, Australia, where Vanunu was baptized as a Christian, he developed just two or three of the photographs – at the request of journalist Oscar Edmundo Guerrero, who demanded to view the “merchandise.” The negatives of these images were developed within an hour in a photography store that offered express film-processing and developing services.<sup>[4]</sup>

4. Distribution: Vanunu contacted the press. Prior to the publication of his report, he stated that he cared deeply about his country, but that he wanted the world to know that Israel was producing neutron bombs. He also stated that he was well aware of the risk he was taking, and that he was willing to make a personal sacrifice so that the future generation of Jewish and Arab children could live in peace.<sup>[5]</sup> After his offer was rejected by *Newsweek* and by the Australian press, he contacted *The Sunday Times* (owned by Rupert Murdoch). On September 26, 1986, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres called an urgent meeting of Israeli newspaper editors, and asked them to postpone their coverage of the news about to be published in *The Sunday Times*, and to offer no Israeli response for the following 48 hours. The editors agreed. This development convinced Andrew Neil, then editor of *The Sunday Times*, that the information provided by Vanunu was a genuine security leak, and not the work of a Mossad agent who or may not have been aware of the intentionally manipulative nature of the task he had been given. Another decisive factor was Vanunu’s disappearance. On September 30, 1986, following his meeting



Vanunu stated that he cared deeply about his country, but that he wanted the world to know that Israel was producing neutron bombs. He also stated that he was well aware of the risk he was taking, and that he was willing to make a personal sacrifice so that the future generation of Jewish and Arab children could live in peace

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, London: Sage, 1993, p. 142.

[2] Yossi Melman and Eitan Haber, *The Spies: Israel's Counter-Espionage Wars*, Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2002, p. 259, in Hebrew.

[3] Thomas B. Cochran, “The Relevance of Mordechai Vanunu’s Disclosures to Israel’s National Security,” in *Vanunu and the Bomb*, ed. Ehud Ein-Gil and Giora Neumann, the Israeli Committee for Mordechai Vanunu and for a Middle East Free of Atomic, Biological and Chemical Weapons, 1998, p. 108, in Hebrew.

[4] In an interview with Shaul Tzedaka, *Haaretz*, September 11, 1987. Quoted in Melman and Haber, *The Spies*, pp. 271–272.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 272.

Images

**Richard Hamilton / Unorthodox Rendition**  
2009-10, oil on canvas, 75x95 cm  
© Richard Hamilton

Previous spread

**Max Friedmann / Vanunu**  
1993, oil on MDF, 41.5x31 cm  
Collection of Rami and Tami Daniel



Images  
**Avner Ben - Gal / Wonderboy**  
 1990, acrylic on canvas, 100x75 cm

Opposite page  
**Michal Na'aman / Vanunu-Vyanunu**  
 ("We were tortured" transcription from the Haggadah)  
 2004, A4 Xerox assisted

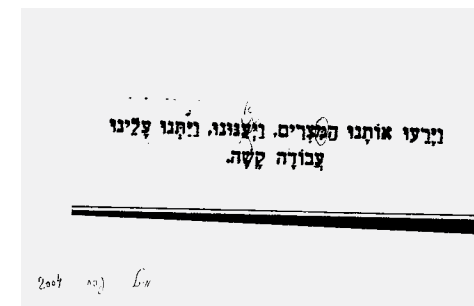
with "Cindy" (Cheryl Bentov, an undercover Mossad agent), Vanunu vanished off the face of the earth.<sup>[6]</sup> At the same time, it seems that Murdoch's main competitor, Robert Maxwell (a supporter of Israel and a personal acquaintance of Ariel Sharon, who invested some 250 million pounds in Israel and was one of the controllers of the Israeli daily *Ma'ariv*), was operating in collaboration with the Mossad<sup>[7]</sup>: A week prior to the publication of the *The Sunday Times* exposé, Maxwell's *Sunday Mirror* published a defamatory article about Vanunu titled "The Strange Case of Israel and the Nuclear Con Man," which included photographs received from Guerrero and a photograph of Vanunu himself.<sup>[8]</sup> To this day, the Israeli state continues to attempt, in various ways, to prevent publication of these photographs. When it was initially unable to do so, it responded by engaging in tactics of counter-distribution, disinformation, defamation and de-legitimization. The act of distribution must thus be studied not only in relation to the attempts to forbid it, but also in relation to the state's strategy of counter-distribution. It is only by examining the larger context in which the photographs were published that we may answer the following questions: Who is the agent who contributed more than any other to the publication of the photographs and may thus be described as the "photographer"? And what agency validated the status of these images as true, thus defining them as a scandalous "scoop" worthy of publication and viewing?  
 5. The Act of Decoding: It was never made clear whether Vanunu's photographs harmed or enhanced Israel's deterrence power. Aside from the fact that only a tiny number of people are capable of decoding the photographs (which underwent five

[6] Ibid., p. 257–296.  
 [7] Yoel Cohen, *The Whistleblower from Dimona*, Tel Aviv: Babel, 2005, pp. 148–149, in Hebrew.  
 [8] Ibid., p. 146.

stages of analysis by production assistants, associate editors and nuclear physics experts), the Israeli state prosecutor went so far as to claim, in the course of Vanunu's trial, that any civil intervention in diplomacy, intelligence operations or foreign relations, as well as the transmission of information to the foreign press, may be defined as "premeditation" – regardless of whether such an act was implicit or explicit, intentional or unintentional. Moreover, the state expanded the scope of the terms "enemy" and "hostile agent" by arguing that Israel is in a state of constant war. ("Anyone living in this state knows... that the Arab countries will exploit every subject, any opportunity to attack Israel. [...] Assistance to the enemy does not have to take place during battle or in the military sphere, but may also take place in the political sphere. [...] The law does not detail the ways in which information can be transmitted.")<sup>[9]</sup> This argument essentially effaced any distinction between the state and its needs and between the actions of its individual citizens.

\*\*\*  
 As Martha Rosler writes, "The credibility of the image as the explicit trace of the comprehensible in the living world has been whittled away for both 'left' and 'right' reasons. An analysis that reveals social institutions as serving one class by legitimating and enforcing its domination while hiding behind the false mantle of even-handed universality necessitates an attack on the monolithic cultural myth of objectivity (transparency, unmediatedness), which implicates not only photography but all journalistic and reportorial objectivity used by the mainstream media to claim ownership of all truth." Rosler argues that the "Right" sees people as "fundamentally unequal," while regarding

[9] From the prosecutor's final speech, quoted in Cohen, *The Whistleblower from Dimona*, pp. 318–320.



elites "as natural occurrences," and wishing to differentiate "elite understanding and its objects from common understanding." The result, as she sees it, has been "the aestheticization (consequently, formalization) of meaning and the denial of content, the denial of the existence of the political dimension." Moreover, in addition to repressing the photographed content in order to transform the photographer himself into an icon, reality is intentionally detached from its images, and images are intentionally detached from any underlying ideology.<sup>[10]</sup> In order to convict Vanunu of engaging in a forbidden photographic act, the state supposedly had to confirm the mimetic affinity between the images and reality, and to admit the existence of what they supposedly portrayed. Yet this was not the case. Instead, the Israeli prosecutor, Uzi Hasson, argued that, "From a legal perspective, there is no relevance to whether or not the information was accurate."<sup>[11]</sup> Based on these criteria, Vanunu was accused of documenting a reality whose existence was not confirmed. Moreover, the relationship between the images and the state's ideology was not simply "severed" in the simple sense of this term, but was rather occluded through the deployment of a complex, multi-dimensional strategy. In addition to silencing the ideological implications of what was captured in Vanunu's images, a parallel strategy was employed in order to define the photographer's own "ideological" stance. In addition to intentionally attempting to describe Vanunu as greedy or insane, or at the very least as diverging unforgivably from accepted norms, while prohibiting the publication of his testimony concerning his motives, the state (and the mainstream Israeli media) repeatedly

[10] See Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004, p. 188.  
 [11] Cohen, *The Whistleblower from Dimona*, p. 239.

attempted to define his psychological profile as that of "an introverted, eccentric, solitary individual, whose emotional makeup is complex and conflicted and whose biography reveals that he did not find his place in Israeli society and in the Israeli state." Hasson described Vanunu in court as someone who "drew increasingly closer to the Arab cause [...] the more strongly he gravitated in that direction, the more hostile he felt toward the Nuclear Research Center. These hostile feelings continued to increase during the war in Lebanon and in its aftermath." Hasson described Vanunu as someone who sought to take revenge on a social system that had discriminated against him due to his Moroccan background, and as one who had taken a decision to sever his relations with the state and "to avenge himself on all those who had wronged him."<sup>[12]</sup> Vanunu's ideological stance was thus simultaneously censored and presented as a poor excuse for "personal problems," which the representative of the state knew how to decode. Rather than ascribing Vanunu's behavior to a coherent political agenda, his behavior was associated with a circumstantial series of unconscious, impulsive personal motives related to his biography. This approach both belittled him and made it possible to argue that the implications of his act were fateful, destructive and dangerous. At the same time, the prosecution subjected the photographic act itself to national security considerations, while denying and rejecting any attempt to read it in relation to other fields of meaning (such as the ecological discourse, pacifism or the work-related "whistleblower" tradition).

\*\*\*  
 The photograph featuring the palm of Vanunu's hand pressed against the interior

[12] Ibid., pp. 249–250.

In order to convict Vanunu of engaging in a forbidden photographic act, the state supposedly had to confirm the mimetic affinity between the images and reality, and to admit the existence of what they supposedly portrayed. Yet this was not the case

of a police-van window following his arrest was taken by Dan Landau, a Jerusalem-based photojournalist, on December 21, 1986 – while Vanunu was being taken into custody following the extension of his detention. The Israeli military censor’s office prohibited the publication of the message he had scribbled on his palm: “Vanunu M Was HIJACKEN IN ROME ITL Came to Rome BY BA (FLY 504).”<sup>[13]</sup> In many ways, this photograph may be described as an inversion of Vanunu’s own photographs of the nuclear reactor: In the first series of photographs, Vanunu played the role of the one who frames the image and determines the length of exposure and the nature of the photographic continuum (a chronological or classificatory one, one that shapes a given scenario or moves from the exterior inwards, from the top down, and so forth). In the photograph featuring the palm of his hand, by contrast, Vanunu is the subject of the photograph, and does not control the photographic frame. The first series is not centered on capturing a decisive moment; on the contrary, it is a portrayal of an existing state of affairs, of a fixed reality and of routines activities. The photograph of Vanunu’s hand, meanwhile, involved a fleeting moment of contact between two individuals.

The first series of photographs is technological and scientific, portraying still-life scenes of an impersonal laboratory (work gloves, control panels, etc.) and of various manually operated objects, and includes no human figures. The second photograph has a remarkably palpable quality, and serves to confirm and validate the individual identity of the photographed subject – capturing his epidermis, his fingerprints and a written message that may be subjected to graphological analysis. At the same time, it is also possible to draw

certain non-coincidental parallels between the two events/types of images: They were both created in the context of a unique opportunity (the smuggling of a camera into the nuclear center, and the finding of a “window of opportunity,” may be compared to Vanunu’s tense expectation for the arrival of a photographer capable of confirming the fact that he was alive, his whereabouts and his kidnapping). Both images combine a photograph and a textual explanation that validates it and endows it with an expressive quality and context. They are both types of snapshots, devoid of any aesthetic quality or meaning independent of what they portray.



Both photographic acts involve certain flaws – Vanunu’s film included several burnt frames, while the message written on the palm of his hand is filled with spelling mistakes and demonstrates poor command of the English language. These two types of flaws served as proof of Vanunu’s subversive intentions, and supposedly proved that he was not operating on behalf of the state, from both a journalistic and a legal perspective. Both images, moreover, were created by individuals in an attempt to undermine secret state

mechanisms, and may be viewed as a form of paparazzi pictures – unauthorized images rapidly shot under heavy pressure; in other words, criminal photographs. According to Bourdieu, the field exercises censorship of the deviant gaze, and “excludes two things: what cannot be said, given the structure of the distribution of the means of expression – the unsayable – and what could be said, almost too easily, but which is censored – the unnameable.”<sup>[14]</sup> Mordechai Vanunu has been located within the structure of the field as one dispossessed of the right to speak, and of all means of expression (an Israeli of Moroccan descent, a member of a large, socio-economically disadvantaged family, a religious believer, a minor technician, an eccentric, a traitor, an enemy of the state, a source of danger). This position has been imposed on him not only in order to justify the “straightforward” censorship imposed upon him, but above all in order to camouflage the regime of the field to which we are all subjected. Opposition to nuclear weapons is perceived, within the Israeli regime of discourse, as what “cannot be said.” Accordingly, the need to warn against their development is silenced in the name of deterrence.

Vanunu was repeatedly presented with various forms of false promises, disinformation, individuals assuming false identities and intentional forms of deception. He worked at a place that lied in his name and obliged him to participate in this lie; he turned to a literary agent who betrayed him, turned to one news agency but was published by another, met a woman who turned out to be a Mossad agent, was kidnapped but then “legally arrested”; his photographs were used against him in a slanderous campaign, he was legally tried, but imprisoned under inhumane



conditions of isolation and surveillance. And even after his release, he was not truly released. With his ability to communicate with the world severely limited, Vanunu has been condemned to remain a silent “original” with the enigmatic smile of the Mona Lisa, who can be observed yet cannot speak. The state has thus forcefully transformed him into a kind of nuclear reactor – the keeper of secret information that must not be explored, a ticking bomb. He is a man treated in accordance with a state policy of intentional vagueness, which is not subject to external, impartial surveillance or criticism. Vanunu was under arrest in Israel for about a month before

the state admitted this fact. During this time, he was denied legal representation. Moreover, he was sentenced to 18 years in prison, nearly 12 of which were in isolation, in accordance with regulation no. 21 of the Israeli Prison Service, which enables a prison director to hold a prisoner in isolation for a total of eight months without a hearing, and to prolong this period of isolation indefinitely, without prior announcement. Vanunu’s windowless cell, which contained no radio or television set, was equipped with a surveillance camera. For two and a half years, the light in his cell was kept on 24 hours a day.<sup>[15]</sup> Vanunu himself thus came to be treated like the Israeli nuclear

reactor – that is, as “what cannot be spoken,” as a kind of inert “landscape” that is constantly observed yet which cannot observe in return, a sign that does not question the forces that control it; above all, he was condemned to be “ours.”

★ ★ ★

*The Sunday Times* never received any official Israeli request to view the recordings and notes of the conversations held with Vanunu.<sup>[16]</sup> There are no reactors producing electricity and/or desalinating sea water in Israel. ↪

[13] Ibid., p. 203.

[14] Pierre Bourdieu, “But Who Created the ‘Creators?’” in *Sociology in Question*, London: Sage, 1993, p. 91.

Images

**Eli Petel / Reactor**

2000, felt-tip pens on paper, 120x150 cm

Opposite page

**Nir Evron / After Modechai Vanunu**

2007, black-and-white Lambda print, 32X38 cm

The works of Max Friedman, Avner Ben - Gal, Michal Na'aman and Eli Petel were part of the exhibition “Fallout” at Hamidrasa Gallery in Tel Aviv, 2004.

[15] Melman and Haber, *The Spies*, p. 295.

[16] Avigdor Feldman, “Vanunu, Secrecy and the Law,” in *Vanunu and the Bomb*, p. 135.

**I AM YOUR SPY / Mordechai Vanunu**

*I am the bureaucrat, the technician, the mechanic, the driver.  
He was told, do this, do that.  
Don't look to the right to the left, don't examine the page. Don't look at all the parts of  
the machinery.  
You're responsible for one screw only. You're responsible for only one rubber stamp.  
Attend to only one thing. Don't give a thought to things beyond  
your understanding. Don't think  
in our place. Go. Keep going. Onwards. Onwards.  
The big brains, the experts with an eye to the future thought:  
Don't worry. There's nothing to fear. Everything's running smoothly.  
Our little pen-pusher is an industrious worker.  
He's a simple technician, he's small  
like all bureaucratiks, they have ears  
and hear nothing, eyes and see nothing, we have heads but not for the small  
he answered them, he thought to himself  
the little citizen. The man with the head screwed on  
straight.  
Who's the boss here, who knows where the train is heading?  
Have they lost their heads? I too have a head.  
Why do I see the entire contraption?  
Why do I see the chasm?  
Does the train have a conductor?  
The bureaucrat the driver the technician the mechanic raised  
his head. Stepped back and saw what a monster  
unbelievable returned rubbed his eyes and really – it's okay, I'm perfectly okay, I really  
do see a monster.  
I'm part of the system, I  
signed this form. And only now I read it to the end. This screw is part of a bomb  
This screw is me. How didn't I see?  
And how is it others go on turning the screw  
Who else knows, who saw, who heard?  
The emperor is indeed naked. I see him.  
Why me. This isn't for me. It's too much for me,  
rise up and cry out. Rise and proclaim to this nation  
you can do it. I'm the screw, the mechanic, the technician. Yes you. You're this nation's  
secret agent. You are the eyes of the state.  
Agent spy show us what you saw.  
Show us what the specialists, the wise, are concealing from us.  
If you're not for us we face a chasm. We face a holocaust, you and only you sit  
At the wheel and see the chasm  
I have no choice, I'm small, a citizen, of the people, but I'll do my duty. I heard  
the voice of my conscience, and there is nowhere to flee. The world is small. Small  
compared to Big Brother. I'm at your service. I'm doing my duty. Take this away from  
me. Come and judge. Ease the burden  
from me. Bear it together with me  
carry on my task. Stop the train, step down  
from the train. The next stop is a nuclear holocaust  
the next book, the next machine, no. There is no  
such thing.*